

VOL. 111  
ISSN 0032-6178

Rs. 8.00  
Printed on 1 JUNE 2006



# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A Monthly Journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
Started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896

"As peak after peak of this Father of Mountains began to appear before my sight...the mind reverted to that one eternal theme which the Himalayas always teach us...which is reverberating in the very atmosphere of the place — renunciation!"

ISSN 0032-6178





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JUNE 2006

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Internet edition at: [www.advaitaashrama.org](http://www.advaitaashrama.org)

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Cover: Sunset over the Garhwal range, Himalayas, with Swami Vivekananda's quotation in the foreground.

उत्तिष्ठत  
जाग्रत  
प्राप्य  
वरान्निबोधत ।

# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!

Vol. 111

JUNE 2006

No. 6



## Traditional Wisdom



SEVĀ: SERVICE

नाकस्य पृष्ठे अधि तिष्ठति श्रितो यः पृणाति स ह देवेषु गच्छति ।  
तस्मा आपो घृतमर्षन्ति सिन्धवस्तस्मा इयं दक्षिणा पिन्वते सदा ॥

On the high ridge of heaven he stands exalted, to the gods he goes, the liberal giver. To him the flowing waters bear their essence, to him this fertile (earth) ever yields abundance. (Rig Veda 10.25.5)

तप्यन्ते लोकतापेन साधवः प्रायशो जनाः । परमाराधनं तद्धि पुरुषस्याखिलात्मनः ॥

Very often compassionate people feel for the sufferings of others. That constitutes the worship of the supreme Divine, the one Self in all. (Bhagavata 8.7.44)

दानाय लक्ष्मीः सुकृताय विद्या चिन्ता परब्रह्मविनिश्चयाय ।  
परोपकाराय वचांसि यस्य वन्द्यस्त्रिलोकीतिलकः स एकः ॥

One whose wealth is for charity, learning for good works, thought for dwelling on the Supreme, and speech for the service of others, is one who is the treasure of all the three worlds.

From the highest Brahman to the yonder worm,  
And to the very minutest atom,  
Everywhere is the same God, the All-Love;  
Friend, offer mind, soul, body at their feet  
These are His manifold forms before thee,  
Rejecting them, where seekest thou for God?  
Who loves all beings without distinction,  
He indeed is worshipping best his God. (Swami Vivekananda)

My son, work to remove the sufferings of the world. (Sri Sarada Devi)

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## ∞ This Month ∞

**Confronting Disaster: The Evolving Perspectives** is our editorial overview of the changing national and international trends in the approach to relief and rehabilitation, which forms the thrust of this issue.

**Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago** highlights the contrasts between the bounties and the wrath of nature.

**Disasters and Civil Society** presents some of the recent relief and rehabilitation experiences of the Ramakrishna Mission to underline how civil agencies could effectively contribute in times of disaster and why a greater coordination between governmental and non-governmental agencies is necessary to deliver effective relief. The author, Swami Srikanandaji, is Assistant Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission.

Disasters are a test of human character, both for the victims and for those who provide relief. If victims have to set aside personal losses to rebuild their lives, caregivers have to often function under threatening conditions. The complex realities of the post-disaster situation are briefly portrayed in **The Human Touch**.

Bangladesh is one country where the Ramakrishna Mission has been involved in extensive relief and rehabilitation operations right from the birth of the nation. A brief summary of these efforts is provided by Swami Sthiratmanandaji, a monastic member of Ramakrishna Mission, Dhaka, in **Ramakrishna Mission Relief: Bangladesh**.

There has been a paradigm shift in the approach to disaster management in recent times, with greater emphasis on preparedness

and development. This is the focus of Prof. Santosh Kumar's article **India's Disaster Risks and Initiatives for Risk Reduction**. The author is Professor, Policy Planning and Community Issues, National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM), New Delhi.

Sri Sudhir Kumar, former Team Leader and Senior Executive, Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority, concludes his detailed presentation: **Gujarat Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Programme: Lessons Learnt**.

Psychological trauma is as undertreated as it is ubiquitous in post-disaster situations. Dr Shonali Sud, Department of Psychology, St Bede's College, Shimla, tells us about the nature of the problem and how it can be countered in **Coping with Disaster: I Think I Can Live Again**.

Swami Amaranandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Centre Vedantique, Geneva, draws our attention to international relief through his nuanced study of the Nobel-winning group **Doctors without Borders**.

Birds expound the Dharma without getting involved in sectarian disputes, and they also get enlightened; so why can't we? says Dr Suruchi Pande, Researcher in Sanskrit, Jnanaprabodhini Institute, Pune, as she concludes her study of **Birds in Buddhist Sacred Texts**.

In the final instalment of **Ramakrishna: His Name and the Science of Japa**, Swami Chetananandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis, discusses how, just as the Divine Name was part of Sri Ramakrishna's very being, his name is providing sustenance to numerous spiritual seekers.

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# Confronting Disaster: The Evolving Perspectives

EDITORIAL

## Eliminating the Scourges

**A** look at the list of major disasters that have ravaged human civilization since the dawn of history reveals epidemics and famine as the biggest killers. Plague, the Black Death, decimated a quarter of the European population in the fourteenth century and continued to claim millions of lives globally right up to the twentieth. Smallpox and cholera epidemics also had very high mortality rates and the influenza pandemic of 1918-19 resulted in nearly 25 million deaths. Civic hygiene, vaccination, anti-microbials and simple measures of hydration have virtually eliminated the older epidemics, but the current AIDS pandemic and the threat of avian flu are persistent reminders of impending disaster.

Famine involves a complex interplay of environmental and human factors. While drought and crop failure are the usual precursors, major famines have been precipitated through political and administrative reasons even when adequate food supplies were available. The most well-known example is the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 which cost 3 million lives even though there was no dramatic decline in food availability. A study of this and other famines by Prof. Amartya Sen and others has highlighted the concept of 'deprivation of entitlements', that is, a reduction in 'the ability of a person to acquire food and other commodities within the prevailing economic, social and legal arrangements'. A small decline in food production brought about by droughts, floods, or similar natural hazards can drive agricultural labourers, landless peasants, marginal and subsistence farmers, petty craftsmen and the unemployed into destitution because of rise in

prices, hoarding of grains, trade restrictions on outside supplies and an inadequate food-distribution system. It has been pointed out that no famine has ever occurred in a functioning democracy because public pressure forces democratic governments to ensure 'protection of entitlements'. Independent India is a typical case in point. There have been numerous droughts across the country after independence but famines have been averted. Key measures for protection of entitlements have included: 1) provision of employment through 'food-for-work programmes' and public works; 2) reduction or removal of restrictions on the inter-state movement of essential grains; and 3) provision of grains through public distribution systems and other agencies, especially to those who cannot procure food on their own. Simple as these measures may now appear to us, they can by no means be taken for granted as the history of famine so forcefully reiterates, and as the recurrent food problems in Africa suggest.

## The Development Perspective

If independent India has successfully ward off major epidemic and famine deaths through judicious health, agricultural and administrative measures, it still remains remarkably prone to natural disasters—cyclones, floods, earthquakes and the like. The traditional approach to managing these disasters was based on effective post-incidence provision of relief and rehabilitation. With improved technical efficiency, early warnings coupled with anticipatory evacuations and other safety measures were activated in areas prone to recurrent calamities. Following the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR,



1990-99) there has been a remarkable shift in the approach to management of disasters. This has especially been highlighted in the aftermath of the 2001 Kachchh earthquake, which Sri Sudhir Kumar has covered extensively for us.

Earthquakes typify hazards that are difficult to predict with any degree of precision. But quake-prone zones have been effectively identified and the fact that appropriate housing technologies can dramatically reduce post-quake mortalities has been convincingly demonstrated in Japan. The Gujarat government's efforts to ensure quake-resistant constructions during the Kachchh rehabilitation, through large-scale training of engineers and masons and sensitization of the public, is a very important advancement. Retrofitting older structures to ensure greater quake resistance is another significant preventive measure that needs to gain greater acceptance in quake-prone areas.

While reduction in mortality is a primary concern of disaster managers, the huge economic losses that are incurred from disasters also require prolonged and sustained rehabilitative measures. Here too the 'development perspective' that aims to convert disasters into *development opportunities* has significantly altered the approach to socio-economic rehabilitation. It sees the rehabilitation process as an opportunity for employment and income generation, for improvement in civic infrastructure as well as social bonding, and as a psychological fillip to the devastated morale of the victims. It also provides an opportunity for educating the public on disaster-preparedness and environmental protection. In fact, with growing awareness of the benefits of disaster-preparedness, the subject is now being incorporated into school curricula. Equally important are the moves to improve technical competence at all administrative levels along with the deployment of appropriate emergency-response technology and the development of a command chain in the administration for prompt response to disasters. The various disaster-management institutes that have been coming up to streamline train-

ing in this field also represent significant developments. The Ramakrishna Mission, which has always pursued a holistic approach to relief and rehabilitation also plans to have disaster-management training as a key course in its newly founded university, RKMVERI.

## The Global Viewpoint

As the world has gone global, disaster response too is now a global phenomenon. While the tsunami of 26 December 2004 was truly global in its physical impact, even more focal disasters bring forth helping hands from virtually every continent. Many underdeveloped and developing nations cannot possibly cope with big disasters without international aid. In fact, Hurricane Katrina was a powerful reminder that even the most developed of nations can stand badly exposed in the face of disaster. It also highlighted the importance of the human and spiritual dimensions of relief.

There are many agencies involved in international relief. In this issue Swami Amaranandaji has focused on Doctors Without Borders (MSF) for us. In direct contrast to the Ramakrishna Mission, MSF 'has a reputation as a highly politicized group, particularly skilful in achieving publicity for its efforts'. In fact 'its vocal opposition to perceived injustice led to its expulsion from several countries'. But what MSF highlights for us is the global perspective of disaster and human suffering, especially in zones of conflict and in the numerous deprived societies of sub-Saharan Africa. It shows how intelligent development of technical tool kits, logistic resources and clear technical guidelines can help one intervene with highly specialized medical care in virtually any part of the world under the most trying circumstances. Its method of enrolment and short-term deployment of skilled medical personnel is also worth emulating both at individual and organizational levels. Most importantly, it reminds us to think globally even when we are acting locally, for human needs and suffering are remarkably similar everywhere. \*

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# Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago

June 1906

## Mother Earth

Ah, mother dear! Broad-bosomed Mother Earth—  
Mother of all our joy, grief, madness, mirth!  
Mother of flower and fruit, of stream and sea!  
We are thy children, and must cling to thee.  
I lay my head upon thy breast and hear—  
Small, small, and faint, yet strangely sweet and clear—  
The hum and clash of little worlds below,  
Each on its own path moving, swift or slow.  
And, listening, ever with intenter ear,  
Through din of wars invisible I hear  
A Homer—genius is not gauged by mass—  
Singing his Illiad on a blade of grass.  
And nations hearken; his great song resounds  
Unto the tussock's very utmost bounds.

States rise and fall each blade grass upon,  
But still his song from blade to blade rolls on  
Through all the tussock world ...

—Victor Daley

I watched a rose brush, blooming wild,  
Till its secret of growth I guessed.  
'Twas kissed of the dew while the sun but smiled,  
Revealing a Rose's best.  
And the breath of the dew dissolved the dust,  
And the look of the sun never said 'You must!'  
But always 'Be yourself; then trust  
To Nature for the rest.'

—Edward Earle Purinton

The world seems to be suffering from a remarkable epidemic of seismic convulsion at the present time. The following list, though by no means complete, shows how widespread these disturbances have been since the beginning of 1906:—

January 24.—Severe earthquake shock in Japan.

January 31 to February 6.—Earthquakes on the coast of Colombia and Ecuador, accompanied by tidal wave. Over 300 persons perished.

February 7.—An immense wave, due probably to a submarine earthquake, devastate[s] the island of Tahiti.

February 20.—Slight shocks felt at Baku, near Tiflis.

February 22.—Mount Pelee and La Soufriere reported active, and earthquakes recorded in many West Indian Islands.

March 17.—Great earthquake in Formosa. Over 3,000 persons killed and injured, and 3,500 houses destroyed.

March 29.—Repeated earthquakes in the island of Ustica, off north coast of Sicily, obliging the inhabitants to leave.

April 3-13.—Eruption of Vesuvius, preceded by earthquakes.

April 6.—A 'sea-quake' at Hongkong.

April 14.—Another earthquake in Formosa.

April 18.—San Francisco destroyed by earthquake.

April 19.—Earthquake at Honolulu.

May 11.—Do. at Sibsagar.

May 18.—Do. at Kangra.

May 21.—Do. at Simla.

—Occasional Notes

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# Disasters and Civil Society

SWAMI SRIKARANANDA

**T**he Ramakrishna Mission has a strong presence in Gujarat, which allowed it to rapidly embark on a meaningful rehabilitation programme following the earthquake of 2001. This programme attempted to make a difference to the lives of men and women who had lost all hope, to the lives of children and the aged. It involved the construction of over seventy-five schools and several community centres, prayer halls and housing colonies. For nearly two years our monks and volunteers were engaged in carrying out these constructions across several districts, overcoming numerous problems, not least the recurrent attacks of malignant malaria, which claimed the lives of two workers and laid low virtually everybody involved in the rehabilitation. But more important than the volume of construction was the presence of the monks and volunteers at the affected sites over these two years. This presence was not only symbolic of the genuineness of the support and concern for the victims but also helped to create those bonds that ensured effective and culturally sensitive rehabilitation, that gave primacy to the psychological needs and wishes of the involved communities. It is incredible how in times of crisis people come together from all over the world to share their grief, pain and sorrow. They cross cultural, national, and other barriers and offer monetary, physical and emotional support, participating in the entire process of recovery. At one time the Mission had to refuse aid, for the funds required to cover its Rs 20-crore commitments had already been raised. What could not, however, be refused was the concern and commitment of the numerous people who helped make the rehabilitation a success.

## NGOs as Accelerators

Our experience shows that unless the primary responsibility is shouldered by the government, NGOs, however well meaning and devoted they may be, cannot provide magical results. NGOs can act as accelerators, augmenting the efforts of the government agencies, but they cannot take spot decisions, cut across bureaucratic and connect with the locals immediately. The ice has to be broken by a facilitator, who is often a person from the local administration or a body which has already made its presence felt in the area. Similarly, an NGO can show results if it has inputs from a residential party which fills in gaps for them and clears bottlenecks. Having to do all this on their own would naturally lead to loss of time and also put a damper on the NGOs' enthusiasm and spirit.

It is important to have a liaison agency that can strengthen the linkages which the NGO wishes to establish, for NGOs can produce important results. They have a genuine interest in helping the affected people, they have resources, and they have links with the outside world. By serving as catalysts, they can ensure that people get enthused enough to participate actively in the rehabilitation process. They can change the complexion of ordinary tasks by giving them a momentum that is infectious and full of hope.

## The Ideological Thrust

NGOs are successful because most of them have a sound ideology to support the work that they have undertaken. This gives a great boost to their initiatives. For example, in the Ramakrishna Mission, our ideology is: 'Service to humans is worship of God.' For us, service is a way



of life, it is a sadhana. This makes all of us at the Mission committed in thought, word and action to the ideal of service. In the last one hundred and eight years we have participated in every major disaster relief across the country. We have also carried out significant relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction work in several countries outside India.

Having a strong service ideology helps give direction to people. They look up to you since they see you endorsing a healthy viewpoint with conviction and a selfless spirit. When a person has been hit or has lost something that is precious to him, be it a piece of property or a dear family member, he seeks solace, comfort and some answers to the dilemmas which otherwise threaten to consume him. This solace often comes only from God or from embarking on a spiritual journey. Hence spiritual organizations have an important role in such situations.

### Connecting with the Victims

Post-tsunami we have done significant work in Tamil Nadu, the Andamans, Kerala and Sri Lanka. Some of the initiatives are still in progress. Many NGOs rush in to help immediately after a disaster. But once the initial rush is over, most of them withdraw. It is likely that they have their own constraints and compulsions. But the Ramakrishna Mission has always tried to set reasonable long-term relief and rehabilitation goals, and then ensure that the projected objectives are achieved even if that means several years of sustained effort under trying conditions.

It is a given fact that a dedicated NGO, by virtue of its sincerity and effectiveness, has the ability to inspire others too. For example in Port Blair, the Jamaat-e-Islami, a local NGO, said that they did not have the financial resources to undertake ambitious relief and reconstruction work but that they could contribute with man hours and physical help. So they joined hands with the Ramakrishna Mission to help reach early relief to the victims. We are accustomed to news about communal distur-

bances and hatred, but here we had Muslim volunteers and Hindu monks working together round the clock, doing whatever was possible.

The Ramakrishna Mission was one of the earliest to respond to the tsunami in the Andamans, as it has a regular centre in Port Blair. Within twelve hours of the disaster we had started relief work in Port Blair and nearby areas. If one were to quantify the amount of aid that we provided, it would be insignificant compared to the efforts of the governmental agencies, but the tangible results that ensued from our efforts were extremely gratifying. The people-to-people contact, restoration of faith and hope, and the manner in which the human chain expanded to draw everyone into the process was our biggest reward.

The greatest casualty in any major disaster is the loss of confidence that people suffer. They often lose the will to survive, having lost their dear ones, seeing their hard-earned property ruined and facing an uncertain future. To recreate that hope and put people back on their feet and help restore their strength, so that they can once again take on the challenges of life, is an onerous task. At our camps in the Andamans, people were daily airlifted from other islands with the clothes they were wearing as their sole possessions. An entire island served as a camp for large groups of such people. On a daily basis our monks, volunteers and others would visit these camps and make a list of their needs. They would then try to arrange for these necessities. At one point of time, as many as forty items of daily use—toothpaste, tea, milk powder, food items, matchsticks, kerosene and other essentials—were being distributed at these camps. In terms of quantity and value these may not add up to much, but along with the physical contribution the connection at the human and spiritual level helped instil in the victims the faith and confidence needed to go through the darkest hours of their lives. It bolstered their spirit of survival and the will to live.

In both the Andamans and Tamil Nadu we were surprised to see many victims refusing

help from government agencies, preferring to be touched, cared and helped by the Ramakrishna Mission. In Nagapattinam, the local administration refused our volunteers permission to set up a base. They showed us a list of clearances that were needed. But people stood by us, saying that they had seen us work from day one and that we should be allowed to continue. The collector was forced to intervene and we were allowed a free hand. Our work here went beyond just physical relief. The restoration of confidence was as important as the process of physical reconstruction. Our volunteers took care to cover areas where no one had reached in the initial stages.

In the Andamans we were one of the first groups to reach the remote Hut Bay area. Access to this island is not easy and so the task of reaching aid there was all the more challenging. It took our volunteers nearly twenty hours to reach this island from Port Blair, with a change of ship after six hours of travel. There was no motorable road within six kilometres of the ferry landing. With great difficulty our group reached the interior regions where nearly ten thousand people were stranded. The relief work that we started here was particularly important because we were practically one of the first people to come and assess the situation there. The people were completely shaken and traumatized. Seeing us in control gave them hope and together we were able to work out a plan to start relief services immediately.

### **Beyond Relief and Rehabilitation**

In Tamil Nadu our initial assessment made us realize that we had to go beyond the issues of primary relief and provision of livelihood. The coastal belt was badly affected and thousands of fishermen had lost their boats. In Nagapattinam we arranged for the manufacture and distribution of 240 mechanized fibreglass boats at a cost of Rs 1.5-2 lakh each. Nets were also provided and we could induce a sense of community participation. The beneficiaries had earlier relied only on wooden catamarans.

They now had motorized equipment making their task simpler. But, as part of our agreement, five families would now have to share each mechanized boat.

The importance of sharing resources and cooperating at the community level was an integral part of the rehabilitation programme, and to get back on their feet and resume normal lives people had to do things which they had perhaps never done before. Interestingly, they happily agreed to our suggestions and in fact often put aside their personal grief to help the community recover! In three days, as per our rough estimates, they were selling fish worth Rs 5.5 lakh—way beyond their earlier ‘best days’. They told us: ‘Swamiji, what we lost in three months, we have recovered in just three days.’ By 20 April 2005 we had distributed 316 boats to 1,567 families in Tamil Nadu.

### **Overcoming Problems**

This is not to say that we did not face any difficulties. For instance, a new ship constructed at the Kolkata shipyard and belonging to the Andaman administration was ready to sail for the Andamans a few days after the tsunami disaster. We tried to persuade the ship authorities to carry our relief supplies, but due to red tape and lengthy procedures our supplies were not accepted and the ship actually sailed empty. We could not even get this cargo rapidly airlifted despite our offers to pay the requisite air fare. Incidentally, these essential relief commodities had been collected at prices nearly three times the usual market rates.

One needs to go beyond the mere desire to help or organize primary aid and relief. The real work starts after that. Permissions, clearances and an understanding of the topography have to be factored in before we can hope to reach help to the needy. A lot of time is lost in transit. At Hut Bay, for instance, only a particular type of ship could be used for loading and unloading vehicles. This ship was not available and we tried sending relief material by the usual ship. This involved unloading the material into

smaller boats and then reloading it onto lorries which would have to travel about six kilometres on a *kuchcha* (unmade) road before they reached their destination. This exercise highlighted how important logistical support was, and for ensuring this support government intervention was an absolute must.

### Crisis of Character

While both victims and caregivers usually reveal a lot of character in the aftermath of disaster, pettiness and blinkered vision can at times seriously hamper relief. For instance, all schools had been closed in the Andamans following the tsunami, and schoolteachers had been instructed by the government to help with the relief work. Unfortunately, at several of the relief camps, these teachers actually started dictating terms. The camp inmates were being given coarse food while the so-called volunteers were demanding good-quality food. A different problem is seen in some villages in West Bengal. Here people are victims of such abject poverty that in spite of warnings by the government that their area could be flooded again, they refuse to relocate to a safer place, in the hope of receiving some aid or help. That hope makes them risk their lives. Then there is the problem of hoarding, often by the less-affected victims, out of worry for the future. In all these situations organizations with a community base and support can effectively address such crises of character and dispel undue fears.

### Coordination between NGOs

With numerous NGOs keen to help, there is the problem of duplication of services. At one place in Tamil Nadu two NGOs virtually came to blows as both wanted to undertake rehabili-

tation at a particular site. The need to coordinate the efforts of NGOs via a nodal agency is highlighted by such incidents. There has to be clarity about the type of emergency powers an NGO can exercise, otherwise mitigation and preparedness would remain mere words on paper.

The concept of lead NGOs with proven capacity in the field of relief and rehabilitation or a system of rating NGO performance could help in allocation of suitable responsibilities to NGOs in times of emergency. For instance, the Ramakrishna Mission has a presence all over the country and in times of disaster is in a position to mobilize relief within twenty-four to thirty-six hours. But a coordinated effort, where various NGOs pool in their resources and work in tandem with the government can be an effective step in bringing about quick and timely relief, minus the stress and tensions of disorganization. Surely, disorder should be the last thing obstructing the path of relief workers and volunteers.

In conclusion, one would like to reiterate the need to strengthen coordination work at all levels of the disaster-management hierarchy. NGOs, community-based organizations and civil-society volunteers have an important role in emergency situations and must work in tandem with government agencies and capacity builders like the National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM). Zonal nodal agencies with sufficient expertise can help with this pooling of resources and coordination of services so that in times of actual crisis the victims may be served more promptly and efficiently. \*

*The author wishes to acknowledge the help provided by Swami Shantatmananda, Ramakrishna Math, Belur, in preparation of this article.*

**G**lobally, underdeveloped countries are more vulnerable to environmental extremes because of their incorporation into a world system that creates situations which only increases their dependency. ... [But] disasters can provide new opportunities for sustainable development. Supporting this view, UNDRO states that: 'Disasters often create a political and economic atmosphere wherein extensive changes can be made more rapidly than under normal circumstances. ... The collective will to take action is an advantage that should not be wasted.'

—A Holistic Look at Disaster Mitigation

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# The Human Touch

*(Continued from the previous issue)*

## A Beacon in the Darkness

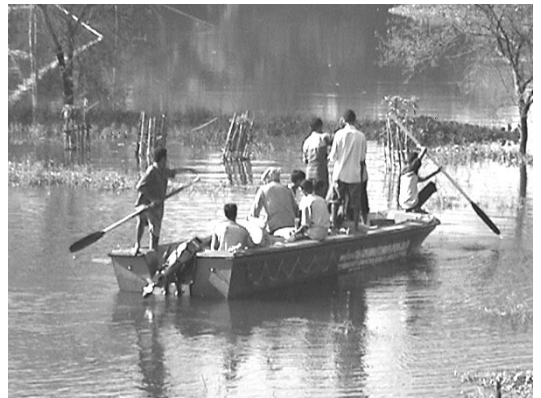
It is usual for Malda district of West Bengal to experience floods almost every rainy season. During such times the Ramakrishna Mission headquarters and its local branch centre undertake relief operations. The following is a first-hand account of a young monk's experiences on one such occasion.



*A half-submerged house*

'This time (in 1994) the relief work was conducted through the Malda centre. Initially we distributed khichri among the affected people. The place of distribution was far away from the ashrama. The khichri drums were first loaded onto a van. After a forty-five-minute journey they would be shifted to a big motor boat, which would take us to our destination after another two hours of travel over water. The whole area was inundated. Even electric poles were under water and very difficult to spot from above. We had to be very, very alert while travelling by boat. If the boat collided with anything under the water and tipped over, then nobody could save our lives. Sometimes we found poisonous snakes moving in the water. After working the whole day we would return to the ashrama at sunset.

'One day we were doing a door-to-door survey in a particular area before distributing garments among the victims. I was so engrossed in the work that I did not notice the passage of time. Suddenly somebody called out to me, "Maharaj, are you not going back?" It was only then that I noticed that it had already become quite dark. How would I reach the jetty? It was a long distance away and it was already quite late. Since I had no money with me, I was afraid I would not be able to make it to the jetty in time. Then the person who called out to me engaged a rickshaw, but the rickshaw-puller would not take me to the jetty for anything less than ten rupees! The road was too muddy and it was too dark, he said. At last, I reached the jetty. My colleagues were waiting for me.



*Navigating in treacherous waters*

'Slowly and carefully our boat began to move through the mango groves, ninety per cent of which was submerged in water. We were literally feeling our way through the darkness. After about an hour's journey the engines were stopped because steering the boat in that darkness amid the dense mango and bamboo groves was becoming too risky. Now the boat was being rowed very slowly. But it was impossible to

spot the jetty on the opposite side. Moreover, just a few metres away from the jetty a bridge had collapsed, which made manoeuvring the boat quite tricky even in daylight. The current was strong too. We had no other alternative but to go ahead and take the risk. And that we did with God's name on our lips.

'Suddenly we saw a red light shining through the dense jungle. We correctly deduced that it was our vehicle, which was waiting near the jetty to pick us up. The driver had left the tail lights on so that we could identify the spot! If I thanked God for being able to get back safely to the camp, I was also grateful that I could be of some service to people stranded in such difficult circumstances.'

### Combating Quackery

There is more to relief than amelioration of physical needs. The following account by Swami Tadgatanandaji illustrates why:



*Water, water, everywhere*

'In 2004, the whole of north Bihar was in the grip of devastating floods because of incessant rains. Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Patna, had started its relief operations in the districts of Samastipur, Darbhanga and Madhubani. The whole of Samastipur and surrounding villages were in neck-deep water. Many people had retreated to the rooftops to escape the inundation—braving the rains, besides hunger and thirst. They were totally cut off by the surrounding flood. The only way to reach

them was with the help of small boats. We supplied them with food packets, water-purification tablets and primary medicines from these small boats.



*Looking forward to a day of service*

'One day while returning to our camp after having distributed relief supplies, we chanced to see a group of people with a seriously ill girl under a banyan tree. The girl had been bitten by a venomous snake and her parents were trying to save her with the help of a village tantrik. While there are some traditional medical practitioners who have potent therapies for snakebites, this tantrik was clearly not one of them. He was trying his best to misguide the patient's attendants so that they would not go to a doctor, giving them false promises and hoping to extract as much money as possible. We offered to take the girl in our jeep to the nearest doctor so that, if possible, the girl could be saved. But the villagers seemed to have full faith in the tantrik. The patient's parents depended wholly on him and would not agree to take their daughter to the doctor even when their immediate neighbours advised them to do so. After a lot of persuasion, good sense prevailed.

'One of our team members, Sri Mahendra Pradhan, volunteered to drive the patient to the nearest doctor. All the roads were under knee-deep water and it was only because Sri Pradhan was very familiar with the topography of the place and the roads that he could drive the pa-

tient to the doctor in quick time. Fortunately, the doctor had a supply of anti-venom, which he immediately administered. It was only after about three days of intensive therapy that the patient recovered. When we offered the doctor his fees he said: "Let me also share in the service to the people of this flooded region." He agreed to have only the cost of the anti-venom reimbursed.'

### 'Where Spirituality Is Resplendent Now'

The following paragraphs are excerpts from *News Today*, Orissa, about the Ramakrishna Mission's services after the super-cyclone of 31 October 1999. The reports were filed in November 2000:



*The cyclone's trail of destruction*

'Last century, while going away, burst upon Orissa state in the form of a super-cyclone and upset the lives of the people in its coastal districts. Lakhs of cattle and trees as well as thousands of people lost their lives in the cyclone. The survivors are struggling hard every moment to make both ends meet. So many voluntary organizations came forward to give a helping hand to the victims. They proclaimed their generosity by distributing food, water, medicines and tarpaulin sheets as immediate help. But later, the victims' distress has again been as usual. Now there is a decrease in the visits of the voluntary organizations. But spiritual institutions like the Ramakrishna Mission, which is giving a practical commentary on humanism, are working honestly with a definite

aim and a sense of service in the cyclone-affected region.

'Kanaguli is a remote village in the Erasama block of Jagatsinghpur district, which was fully swept away due to the force of the monster tidal wave. There is no proper road to this village. *News Today's* team reached this village with great difficulty. Those who have observed the services rendered by the Ramakrishna Mission can understand how great and difficult this stupendous task is.



*Discussing the details of reconstruction*

'Swami Parasukhananda, who is supervising the Mission's activities in Kanaguli village, informed us that in the initial stage daily-needed commodities like food, clothes, bed sheets and utensils costing Rs 1.5 crore were distributed by them to nearly 10,000 families. The cyclone victims now need homes and employment. He further said that they have decided to build 330 houses with latrine blocks and 6 cyclone shelter-cum-schools, and dig 8 deep and 1 shallow tube wells. 330 agricultural kits are being handed over. Technical assistance is being supplied to the village by the staff and students of the Ramakrishna Mission Shilpamandira polytechnic, Belur.

'Ramchandra Swayin, Raghunath Naik, Mathuri Barik and Sukhadev Biswal, residents of Kanaguli village, expressed their happiness over the fact that there is no deficiency in the quality of the building material. The life of the cyclone victims is on an upswing at present as

the labour power of the villagers is being utilized in these construction works and they are also getting wages.

'The shape and features of Kanaguli village, which was once like any other village, have now changed. Spirituality is resplendent now in that cyclone-affected village through the influence of the Ramakrishna Mission. Many people in the village join in the daily prayers of the Mission. After finishing their daily duties, they [the villagers] reach the ashrama in the evening and play volleyball for a short time and join in the evening arati. It cannot but be said that the credit for introduction of discipline in the daily routine of the villagers goes to the Ramakrishna Mission.'

### 'You Need It for the Welfare of the Village'

26 January 2001. As the nation celebrated its fifty-first Republic Day a calamitous earthquake hit Gujarat.



*Levelled by the earthquake*

**Rajkot:** A senior swami standing in the courtyard of the Ramakrishna Ashrama in Rajkot was aghast to see the temple suddenly tilt to the left and then to the right. Somewhat disoriented, he looked at himself. He was being rocked by an unseen force and was unable to stand steadily. It took him a few moments to realize that he was experiencing an earthquake.

Another brahmachari, who was working in the backyard, heard a rumble, but thought it was probably a heavy truck passing by. Then he

too felt the earth shake beneath his feet. When he looked at the boys of the ashrama's students' home who were enjoying themselves in the playground, he saw them stunned and scared. Not knowing what to do, they instinctively ran towards the 'safe' hostel building. Though the brahmachari tried to stop them, he was not successful. Luckily, there were no casualties.

But thousands upon thousands were unlucky. Debris of collapsed structures that covered the landscape gave an idea of the magnitude of the killer quake. That night a monastic member of the Rajkot ashrama saw an old man pushing a handcart along the road in the dead of night. He asked the man what he was doing at such an hour, but the man was mute with sorrow. Slowly, pointing towards what now appeared to be four dead bodies, the old man murmured, 'My daughters. I am taking them for cremation.'

Immediately on receiving the district collector's request for help in the morning, monks of the ashrama purchased all the *gathia* that was available in the local market and started preparing food packets. By noon they had supplied a considerable quantity of food to a nearby hospital.

Led by their principal, who was a devotee of the ashrama, four hundred teachers, staff and students worked round the clock to prepare food packets. In all, fifteen buses, two trucks and two vans were required to transport relief materials to the camps.

Even this journey was not without its hazards. The convoy was moving at quite a speed despite the damaged highway. Near Surajbari Bridge the lead vehicle suddenly collided with something. When the monks had gathered themselves together, they were surprised to see that the portion of the highway on which they were travelling had collapsed, causing their vehicle to hit the opposite portion head on!

The earthquake was a great leveller. Even days after the Ramakrishna Mission's relief work had started the state was experiencing frequent aftershocks and the terrified people were



spending their days and nights out in the open. One night a monk working at the relief camp took a telephone call from an unknown man. 'Swamiji, I am a well-to-do person but have lost a few things now. My family is having to sleep on the street, and it is terribly cold. My relatives have despatched some blankets for us by air from Bangalore, but they have not reached here yet. Could you kindly lend us some until they arrive?'

The people of Gujarat lost a great deal of their material possessions to the earthquake, no doubt, but still they held their heads high. Monks who were actively involved in relief work recount many occasions where families declined to accept help even when they were in dire straits. 'Please give them to somebody else; we will try to manage ourselves as long as we can.' Many others offered their share of relief materials to others who were worse off.

One rather untoward incident revealed the people's sense of self-respect. While distributing relief materials in a village, a volunteer said something that had a hint of pity in it, or so the villagers thought. Immediately the village head stepped forward and declared that they would rather go without help. The team was at a loss and rushed to the monk-in-charge, who approached the headman and asked what the matter was. The headman narrated his side of the story and said, 'We don't want any help from you.' It took a lot of persuasion before the matter was finally sorted out.

Relief operations carried out on such an immense scale obviously need steady financial backing. However, given the overwhelming sympathy that the Gujarat tragedy evoked worldwide, money was never a big issue. But what struck the Ramakrishna Mission as particularly admirable was the genuinely self-effacing nature of some 'big' donors. One of them happened to be a humble old retired schoolteacher from a village in West Bengal. He donated Rs 1,00,000—probably a very great part of his savings—to the Mission's earthquake-relief fund, but added a personal request: 'Swamiji, please

let me remain anonymous. Let my name not appear anywhere. Write a receipt if you must, but kindly see that it ends there.' Incidents like this also reflect the common people's trust in the Mission.

Within a couple of months after relief work started at Dhaneti, day temperatures began to rise well over 40°C, making sustained hard work impossible. So monastic workers and volunteers were compelled to rest during the day and work from sunset to sunrise! With the onset of rains, though very scanty, malaria raised its head and soon claimed the lives of a carpenter and a mason. All but two monastics were laid low by the epidemic and had to be moved to Rajkot for treatment. The situation demanded that the camp be shifted to some other place. Since the work could not be left unfinished, it was suspended until winter. But in winter water was scarce and the construction work had to be managed with the extremely limited supply provided by the local administration.

**Porbandar:** When large-scale rehabilitation work was undertaken in Porbandar, the Gujarat state government announced a subsidy for those whose houses were damaged by the quake. But the subsidy did not cover construction that was taken up by other agencies. Not only that, even if the government itself provided land and undertook to build the new houses—albeit through NGOs—the beneficiaries would have to forfeit ownership of their old land and dwellings. Fearing that the plots allotted by the government would be too small to be of much use, a group from Bharwada village urged the Ramakrishna Mission's Porbandar centre to help them. Appreciating their sentimental attachment to their old homes, the centre agreed. It opened negotiations with the government and within a short time acquired land at several different places—especially in areas that had requested its help. Within four months, the centre constructed not only three large housing colonies but also as many as thirty-seven school buildings.

**Surentranagar:** Usually the general public does not get to know the personal sacrifices that lay devotees make in order that the Mission's work may proceed unhampered. One such example has already been mentioned earlier. Dr Vaghela of Surentranagar is another. When he saw that the four-member team of monastic workers had no good place to stay in Surentranagar, he promptly vacated his own house and accommodated them there!

**Limbdi:** Nanikatechi is one of several villages in Gujarat that were overlooked by relief agencies. One reason was that it was located in an inaccessible place of interior Gujarat; the other reason was that it was inhabited mainly by tribals and marginalized people. But neither reason deterred our Limbdi centre. Within six months it had put in place a big school building complete with library, play equipment and toilets—something unheard of in these parts. When chief minister Sri Narendra Modi was invited to inaugurate the school, he was visibly moved. He happened to be the first chief minister to visit that part of the state.

Jambdi was another such village. But here the Mission's work would not have succeeded to the extent it did without the spontaneous enthusiasm that the villagers showed. In an act of high benevolence, an old man offered the only piece of land that he possessed, so that the Mission could build a school there. And when water had to be brought from the village pond during construction work, the womenfolk supplied hundreds of pots of water cheerfully—this heavy labour in addition to their back-breaking household chores. 'It is our work', they would say modestly.

In Fulwadi village the land available for construction of a school was just enough, but the school would have to go without toilets. The monk in charge of the job convened a village meeting, where, in another act of magnanimity, an elderly man donated the plot of land that he owned adjacent to the school. When asked if he was sure he wanted to give it away because it was all that he owned, he said,



*A fruit of local benevolence*

'Swamiji, after all you need it for the welfare of the village'!

Thanks to people like these, Limbdi centre built twenty-four schools, almost all of them in the most neglected parts of the state.

### **'I Hate the Sea'**

Three huge waves hit the Sri Lankan coast on Sunday, 26 December 2004. The second one, roughly twenty-five feet high, was the biggest of them all. The swami in charge of the Mission's sub-centre in Batticaloa was walking with his assistant behind the ashrama, when that muddy wall of water hit the neighbourhood. Even as the wave receded, the swami took in the situation and sent his assistant with a vehicle to help anyone in need. He instructed the driver to buy as much food as possible and start using the ashrama stock right away. With the assistant swami and the driver engaged in rushing injured people to the nearest hospital, the old swami procured Rs 50,000 worth of medicines and arranged to send them to places where they were required. The centre runs a students' home, and the swami asked the boys to get ready for round-the-clock cooking and distribution of food. 'See that Mother's children are well taken care of!' That done, he himself set out into the neighbourhood to reassure the stricken people.

Soon relief operations gathered pace. But things were hardly smooth-sailing. Once the main centre in Colombo despatched a truck loaded with relief materials to camps in

Mullaattivu. On the way it was stopped by members of the political wing of a guerilla organization, who ordered the materials to be unloaded at a place of their choice. The relief team had no other alternative but to do so.



*In the relief storeroom at Batticaloa*

On another occasion, soldiers barged into the storeroom where a brahmachari was readying things for the next day's distribution. They demanded that the store be locked forthwith and things left in their charge. This time, however, argumentation was not entirely fruitless. The brahmachari asked the soldiers what exactly they wanted, and the officer replied that relief had to be distributed in an area they specified. Then the brahmachari made bold and asked for a list of names of affected people, which the soldiers provided and left assured.

Meanwhile, the centre received containers of rice, bottled water, milk and biscuit packets, and canned food from friends based in the gulf emirates, Malaysia and Australia. But getting these cleared by customs proved to be extremely troublesome. And when they were cleared they had to be addressed to the government agent in Batticaloa, so that 'enquiries' on the way could be minimized. That the containers reached the centre at all was solely due to God's grace, so say people who were involved in the Batticaloa centre's relief efforts!

Here are a few frightful experiences people had when the deadly tsunami struck Sri Lanka:

The barber of the Batticaloa centre was on

his way to the Sunday Mass with his family, when all of a sudden they saw the tsunami approaching. They ran as fast as they could, but the wave overtook them all. Mother and daughter were the first to be carried away, followed by the father. Before the eleven-year-old boy knew what was happening, he found himself being swept away, but managed to cling to a piece of wood. That afternoon he was found half dead some fifteen kilometres away. Asked later if he would like to return to his old place, the boy said, 'No, never! It is a place of ghosts!'

When certain Ramakrishna Mission monks met a group of students at a Sunday religious class, they found the children so terrified that they were afraid even to talk about water. One boy just pointed at a twenty-foot-high coconut tree, indicating that that was the height of the wave that took his friends. 'My friends ...', he broke down, 'gone ... gone with the water ... I *hate* the sea!' He could say no more.

One of the boys of the centre's students' home had gone to a relative's house to play, when the waves struck. The force of the water was so great that the boy was thrown on top of a tree. He spent over one hour on his precarious perch before he was rescued by a passer-by.

Another woman was dragged along a great distance by the waves and deposited in a water tank on their way back. As the bruised woman slowly came to her senses she felt about for some support and found a length of rope. The moment she grabbed hold of it, she was violently jerked out of the tank—and saved. 'It was not a rope, but the tail of a cow!' narrated the woman. 'The surprised cow took to its heels and pulled me out of what would certainly have been a watery grave. That cow was God in disguise.'

The Mission also runs a girls' home in Karaitivu. On this particular day the coconut plucker was at his job when he spotted the waves. He shouted to his assistant, who was standing below, and thus warned the home's warden, who acted immediately and led all twenty-five girls to the roof. They only came down after the waves had subsided. \*

# Ramakrishna Mission Relief: Bangladesh

SWAMI STHIRATMANANDA

Bangladesh is a land of rivers. With five major river systems—those of the Padma, the Jamuna (Brahmaputra), the Meghna/Surma, the North Bengal rivers and the rivers of the Chittagong Hill Tracts—crisscrossing its territory, the country is virtually a network of rivers. Much of the land comprises low alluvial plains—less than thirty feet above sea level on the average—and the rivers keep constantly, and at times dramatically, changing their courses. Every year, between June and October, the rivers overflow and flood vast tracts of land. Areas like the Bhar basin between the flood plains of the Padma and the Jamuna are flooded up to a depth of twelve feet. While this inundation replenishes the alluvial deposits and enhances soil fertility, it causes much damage to crops, property, and also to life.

Another common natural calamity to which Bangladesh is particularly prone is cyclone. The Bay of Bengal serves as a hotbed for low-pressure systems that turn into cyclones. These cross into southern Bangladesh with remarkable regularity, causing great havoc.

## Refugee Relief, 1971

The birth of Bangladesh in 1971 is itself the story of a major humanitarian disaster. It involved much loss of life and property, numerous brutalities and violations of human rights, and large-scale disruption and displacement of communities. The relief and rehabilitation that the Ramakrishna Mission provided for the peo-

ple of Bangladesh at this time was one of the largest such efforts in the Mission's history.

March 1971 saw the beginning of an influx of refugees into India following the military crackdown in East Pakistan. What began as a trickle soon turned into a torrent and before the Indian government could realize the extent of the problem the border areas of West Bengal,

Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura were swamped by large masses of refugees. The Mission began serving the refugees through its centre at Katihar on 13 April 1971. The border camp at Radhikapur across Dinajpur provided for 24,000 refugees. In times of chaos, disease and death this camp served as a model of order and hygiene. However, it had soon to be shifted to the more interior site of Dalimgaon to avoid shelling by Pakistani troops. Within a few weeks the Mission was running over a dozen relief camps across the above-mentioned border

states. At their peak these camps had around 2,20,000 people under their care.

**Material Help:** The primary thrust at these camps was the provision of secure temporary dwellings and food and clothing, maintenance of order and hygiene, and attending to the sick. While cooked food was provided in the initial stages, as the problem dragged on dry rations were provided to families along with cooking utensils and some cash for fuel and other accessories. Regular milk supplies were also arranged. Many doctors provided medical care at a token remuneration and the death rate at



East Bengal evacuee relief, 1971



*A view of the Ramakrishna Mission's refugee camp at Gaighata near the Bangladesh border, 1971*

these camps remained remarkably low.

**Psychological Support:** But the greatest help these refugees needed was in combating their mental trauma. Swami Lokeswaranandaji, who had been actively involved in this relief work, observed:

Many refugees had had such a harrowing experience that even after their arrival in India they remained dazed for quite some time. They were just living corpses! If you asked them anything they either did not talk at all or talked vaguely and incoherently. Young girls who had lost their husbands stared wild-eyed and clutched at their babies if somebody mentioned about the way their husbands had been shot dead. Their mothers-in-law, however, howled in grief. ... In fact most people resented being questioned about their experience, for they did not want to be reminded of the humiliation and horror they had gone through.



*Distribution of clothes and baby food in Baliati by Ramakrishna Mission, Dhaka*

... A survey of the refugees revealed that there were very few young men and women among them. Social workers who visited the camps could not help noticing this. If they asked any refugee the reason for this, his face fell.

Even when they found safe shelter, their minds were ravaged by worries about their dear ones from whom they had been separated, about their land and property, and about an uncertain future. There were many who were enthused by the struggle and sacrifice of their people, but there were also others to whom politics mattered little.

As days passed the refugees began to slowly come to terms with the situation and tried to gain control of their lives. They came forward to help the Mission workers in whatever ways



*Games organized for refugee children at the Kalishima camp on the Bangladesh border, 1971*

they could. Many of them were skilled in different trades and professions—carpentry, tailoring, teaching, fishing and the like—and they began to seek out jobs to earn money. There were many children at the camps and as the Mission tried to organize classes for them many refugee teachers volunteered their services and saw to it that these classes continued right up to the end of the camp. Music recitals, film shows, games and other recreations were also arranged to help the camp inmates overcome their gloom.

### Reconstructing Bangladesh

It was only at the end of 1971 that Bangladesh secured its independence and the refugees



*Milk and fruits being served to schoolchildren, 1971*

began returning to their homes. But now the huge task of reconstruction and rehabilitation was on hand. The government of Bangladesh formally requested the Ramakrishna Mission to help it in this programme of national reconstruction. Many branches of the Mission that had to be shut down during the Pakistani crack-down were now revived and numerous other groups associated with the Mission also participated in its rehabilitation efforts.

Regular distribution of milk to tens of thousands of people, provision of clothing to several lakh needy persons, and conducting of mobile medical services were taken up as primary relief measures. Aid was also provided for rehabilitation and by March 1973 the Mission had helped with the construction of nearly



*Milk distribution at Ramakrishna Mission, Dhaka*

1,400 houses and sunk 222 tube wells for provision of safe drinking water. The government and the people of Bangladesh were especially appreciative of the Mission's efforts to reach aid to the most needy, irrespective of religious affiliations or socio-political distinctions.

These relief and reconstruction efforts continued for several years and involved expenditure worth several crore taka.

### **Relief and Rehabilitation in Times of Flood and Cyclone**

Bangladesh has witnessed much change since the turbulent early days of independence. But its vulnerability to floods, cyclones and other natural disasters has meant that relief and rehabilitation remain a recurrent need. The Ramakrishna Mission has consistently tried to do its best to address these needs. Besides the many small-scale relief undertakings, it has pro-



*Patients queue up at the charitable dispensary run by Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narayanganj*

vided relief and rehabilitation on a large scale following the devastating floods of 1987, 1988, 1995 and 1998, the massive cyclone and tidal upsurge of 1991, and the cyclones and tornados of 1989, 1996 and 1997.

The Dinajpur centre catered to the food and clothing needs of nearly 30,000 people across 24 towns and 22 villages during the floods of 1987 and the Dhaka and Mymensingh centres attended to over 7,000 people besides providing medical aid to over 4,000 patients. The following year too there were massive floods and, besides providing food supplies, the Mission distributed over 1.5 lakh items of clothing to flood victims in Dhaka, Barisal, Dinajpur, Narayanganj, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Bagerhat, Baliati and Habiganj districts. The centre at Mymensingh also un-

dertook distribution of 36,000 sachets of oral-rehydration salts among 9,000 families to combat diarrhoeal diseases.

On 26 April 1989 a powerful tornado wreaked much havoc in Dhaka and Manikganj districts. Besides providing primary relief with food, clothing and medical aid, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Dhaka, undertook the construction of 424 houses in 4 villages, all equipped with sanitary latrines and fuel-conserving ovens. The Bagerhat centre also constructed 156 houses and renovated two primary schools in Khulna and Bagerhat districts. Besides the unstinted assistance received from the local community and administration, the Mission also received a monetary aid of Rs 46.9 lakh from the people of India through its High Commissioner in Bangladesh.

The super-cyclone and massive tidal upsurge of 29 April 1991 probably ranks as the worst natural calamity in recent times in Bangladesh. Several major islands were totally submerged in the tidal upsurge and several lakh people lost their lives in south-eastern Bangladesh. Even as the Mission provided primary relief at Banskhal, Sitakunda, Anwara, Maheshkhali and Cox's Bazar of Greater Chittagong district (the expenditure on this count over the next few months was nearly 1 crore taka), the near-total destruction of houses called for immediate measures to provide housing. After a



*Huts constructed under the Ramakrishna Mission's cyclone-rehabilitation programme in the Chittagong coastal area, 1991*

careful survey of the victims, a plan for constructing 978 houses was taken up. The beneficiaries were selected taking into consideration the age and income of the victims, land ownership, and the possibility of soil erosion so that the most needy were served. The government of India offered to supply 9,000 galvanized-iron sheets; Help the Aged, London, offered to sponsor the housing of 300 families; and the Vedanta Society of Northern California provided \$53,000 in aid of the project. Groups of carpenters and masons were mobilized to fabricate reinforced-cement-concrete pillars and bamboo walls. Most of the houses were in place within eight months and the work was widely appreciated by the recipients as well as the donor agencies.

Though the volume of the relief work undertaken by the Ramakrishna Mission may be small in comparison to the national needs, yet its ability to reach the most needy sections of society and the spirit behind this service is widely appreciated. These efforts also provide the monks and volunteers of the Mission an opportunity to serve and relate to the needy masses in a spirit of worship. The first home minister of Bangladesh had formally requested the participation of the Ramakrishna Mission 'in this grand endeavour of ours to build *Sonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal)'. The Order has certainly attempted its best to respond to this call. \*



*Swami Aksharanandaji of Ramakrishna Mission, Dhaka, with a cyclone-affected family in front of their new house*



# India's Disaster Risks and Initiatives for Risk Reduction

PROF. SANTOSH KUMAR

## The Disaster Profile of India

India, one of Asia's largest and probably most vulnerable countries, is greatly exposed to a variety of natural disasters. In 2001 it accounted for 24 per cent of all disaster-related deaths that took place in Asia. At any point of time one region or another in the country is affected by either flood, cyclone, earthquake or drought. States along the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea are affected by about 80 per cent of all cyclones (and accompanying floods and tidal surges) generated in the region. More than half of the country (all states in the Himalayan belt and many in the so-called Shield of India, e.g. Maharashtra and Gujarat) is vulnerable to earthquakes; 40 million hectares of land in India are vulnerable to floods; and 68 per cent of arable land is drought-prone. Huge social (primarily health) and financial costs are incurred in droughts. This creeping, slow-onset disaster has intensified in India (and regionally too) in the past few years. The observers of this phenomenon in India termed 2002 the 'all-India drought year' (with rain deficiency of over 19 per cent, and drought conditions affecting 29 per cent of the country's geographical area), and the state of Rajasthan was declared to be under 'severe drought'. Severe water scarcity impacts agricultural and food production, diminishes the access of the poor to safe water supply, and makes serious inroads into developmental achievements. Due to its subcontinental proportions and the multiplicity of hazards faced, the reality of one part of the country facing droughts while another reels under floods is often a *fait accompli*.

Year	People Affected (millions)	Dwellings Damaged	Damage to Property (million US\$)
1991	34.27	1,190,109	2.29
1992	19.09	570,969	4.22
1993	26.24	1,529,916	10.69
1994	23.53	1,051,223	2.28
1995	54.35	2,088,355	8.57
1996	54.99	2,376,693	10.62
1997	44.38	1,103,549	Not available
1998	52.17	1,563,405	0.15
1999	50.17	3,104,064	214.94
2000	59.43	2,736,355	168.42
2001	78.82	846,878	2526.32

*Damage due to natural disasters in India (1991-2001).*

*Source: Tenth Five Year Plan, 2002*

According to World Bank estimates, reported direct losses to public and private infrastructure in India have amounted to approximately \$30 billion over the past 35 years. Since less than 25 per cent of the registered loss events actually provide any loss estimates, the official numbers substantially understate the true economic impact of direct losses. A crude gross up of reporting frequency indicates that direct natural-disaster losses add up to about 2 per cent of India's GDP (approx. Rs 23,000 crore) and up to 12 per cent of central government revenues.

Modern disaster-management efforts began in India in 1883 with the constitution of the Famine Commission and promulgation of the First Famine Code. Given the high vulnerability to droughts, the initial focus was on food

scarcity and famine; therefore the Scarcity Relief Division within the Ministry of Agriculture was delegated the nodal charge of drought and scarcity management. With dawning realization of the need to manage other disasters also, the Scarcity Relief Division was upgraded to the Natural Disaster Management (NDM) Division. In June 2002 the subject, except drought, was transferred to the Ministry of Home Affairs.

### **The National Disaster Management System**

In the federal structure of the Indian administration, disaster management is the responsibility of the states; the national government has a supportive role. The basic responsibility for undertaking rescue, relief and rehabilitation measures in the event of natural disasters is that of the concerned state governments, particularly the district administration. The role of the central government is supportive, in terms of supplementation of physical and financial resources and undertaking complementary measures in sectors like warning, transport and inter-state movement of food grains.

The continuous exposure to disasters enabled the country to have a fairly well-structured institutional system that is required to respond to all crises and disasters. At the national level, the Ministry of Home Affairs is entrusted with the nodal responsibility for managing disasters. However, in view of the highly technical and specific nature of response to technological disasters like aviation and rail accidents, chemical disasters and the like, ministries dealing with the particular subject have the nodal responsibility for handling the particular disaster. Thus droughts are handled by the Ministry of Agriculture, biological disasters by the Ministry of Health, nuclear accidents by the Department of Atomic Energy, and major breakdowns in any essential services by the concerned ministries.

### **A New Approach**

India took cognizance of the International

Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) objectives and has undertaken serious measures to reduce loss of life, property damage, and social and economic disruption caused by natural disasters. The learning process through various disasters over the years, augmented by the deliberations of the global community on disaster-risk reduction focused our attention on the prevention, preparedness and mitigation aspects of disaster management, rather than the relief-oriented and response-based approach followed earlier. Keeping in view the IDNDR objectives, the Yokohama Strategy, and the Plan of Action for a Safer World (Istanbul 1996), efforts towards more proactive preparedness measures in contrast to the reactive response-oriented measures were initiated.

The inherent two-way link between disasters and development has now come to be widely recognized. Disasters have an impact on development while developmental processes make their own contribution to the consequences of disasters. The cost of rehabilitation and reconstruction of a shattered infrastructure and economy are indeed enormous, and are carried over for years. In this context, some initiatives have been undertaken, which have had a positive impact on the shifting paradigm—from a response- and relief-oriented to a more comprehensive prevention-, preparedness- and mitigation-oriented approach. Some of the major initiatives are briefly mentioned hereunder.

New institutional arrangements are being made in the form of authorities, ministries and departments at the national and state levels to undertake disaster-mitigation and -prevention processes on a long-term, sustainable basis. At the national level, the National Disaster Management Authority has been set up with the Prime Minister as its chairman. The state of Uttaranchal has created a Ministry of Disaster Management headed by the minister of disaster management and health. The Disaster Mitigation and Management Centre (DMMC), an

autonomous institution under the state government, was created to coordinate human-resource development and capacity building in the field of disaster management in the state.

In Gujarat, the aftermath of the devastating earthquake of 2001 prompted the state government to take a fresh look at its existing capabilities, which were found to be inadequate. The Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority (GSDMA) was constituted under the chief minister's chairmanship in February 2001 as an overarching authority for reconstruction and rehabilitation as well as preparedness and mitigation. GSDMA was constituted on the pattern of a similar authority formed in Orissa—the Orissa State Disaster Management Authority (OSDMA)—after the super-cyclone of 1999. Large-scale reconstruction and rehabilitation works have been undertaken by these authorities.

In view of the extreme vulnerability of the country to devastating disasters, the Planning Commission has incorporated a chapter titled 'Disaster Management: The Development Perspective' in the Tenth Plan document to make the whole planning process sensitive to various dimensions of disaster management and for mainstreaming the disaster prevention, reduction and mitigation concerns in the process of development. The inclusion of this separate chapter on disaster management is considered to be one of the most important developments in disaster management in India.

Over the years, it is expected and hoped that this will go a long way in tackling disasters on a long-term basis. It also sets out the broad parameters and strategies for information dissemination and research initiatives, capacity building, training and education, community-level initiatives and institutional arrangements. The Tenth Plan also addresses community-based disaster preparedness and management by way of strengthening and capacity building of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) (local-level governance), non-governmental and community-based organizations (NGOs and CBOs). A special mention has been made of the role of the youth in disaster management, not only through educational institutions but through youth movements like Nehru Yuvak Kendra Sangathan (NYKS), National Cadet Corps (NCC), National Service Scheme (NSS), and Bharat Scouts and Guides.

Under the umbrella of a community-driven approach, community-led disaster-management initiatives have gained momentum in many states, which are making sincere efforts to involve the community in partnership efforts for risk reduction. The Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Programme of the Gujarat government is an innovative scheme launched to encourage GO-NGO partnership in order to mainstream the efforts of corporate and non-governmental organizations for long-term disaster-management issues.

The National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM) was created in 2004 for long-term capacity development in the country. NIDM will work as an institute of excellence in disaster-management studies in India. An institute of this type is needed not only to serve as a credible think tank for the government on subjects related to disaster-risk reduction (pre-disaster initiatives) and management (post-disaster measures), but also to implement the task of human-resource development in the field of disaster management.

Our 'Vision 2020' is to build a safer and more secure India through sustained collective effort, synergy of national capacities and people's participation. What looks a dream today will be transformed into reality in the next two decades. This is our goal and we shall strive to achieve this goal with a missionary zeal. The path ahead, which looks very challenging today, will become a lot easier as we move along together. \*

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# Gujarat Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Programme: Lessons Learnt

SUDHIR KUMAR

*(Continued from the previous issue)*

## Revision of Building Codes

There is a common saying: 'Earthquakes do not kill people but poor construction does.' The validity of this statement is evidenced by the fact that while an earthquake of a magnitude of 6.9 on the Richter scale killed 13,805 people in Gujarat on 26 January 2001, the death toll in a quake of even greater magnitude that occurred in the US a few days later was in a single digit.

A large number of engineered buildings, including those made of reinforced cement concrete (RCC), collapsed due to improper design and inadequate use of construction technology. Hence, immediately after the quake, the existing Gujarat Development Control Regulations (GDCR) were amended to include the mandatory provisions and codes of the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) for seismic, wind and fire safety.

## Housing Reconstruction

Housing was the worst-affected sector as 12 lakh houses were destroyed or damaged. Of these, 2.1 lakh had to be reconstructed and the rest required repair or retrofitting. Broadly speaking, two programmes were announced for reconstruction and repair of affected houses:

*Owner-driven Reconstruction Programme:* The fastest way to finish the reconstruction programme would have been to outsource the reconstruction activity to big companies who have the expertise and capacity. This arrangement would have led to completion of the job in six months, thus securing the government against potential allegations and criticism. But

that would not have resulted in the training and capacity-building of local masons and engineers in earthquake-resistant construction. People would not have understood the need for and the method of construction of hazard-resistant houses, leaving the future generations as vulnerable as ever. The state government took the hard way and opted for owner-driven construction so that the houses were constructed at the pace and convenience of the owner and disaster-management capacity could be built for generations to come. Nearly 11 lakh houses have been covered under this approach, which includes 1.75 lakh houses in the reconstruction category and the rest in the repair category.

*Public-Private Partnership Programme (PPP):* Many NGOs, state governments and corporate bodies showed keen interest in the reconstruction of private houses. Hence this programme was evolved mainly to involve NGOs and the civil society and to ensure people's participation and partnership. In this programme, the total cost of providing habitation (private houses along with necessary local infrastructure such as schools, primary health centres, roads, etc.) was shared equally by the government and the NGOs. *Gram sabhas* (a body of all adult members of the village) were empowered to take decisions about relocation and selection of new sites. The government acted as a facilitator by signing a memorandum of understanding with the concerned NGO, after the *gram sabha's* approval of the NGO's proposal. The salient features of the programme were:

- *Choice to Beneficiary:* Beneficiaries were

given a wide range of choices for reconstruction. In the owner-driven approach reconstruction activity was undertaken by the beneficiary, while in the public-private partnership, NGOs worked in consultation with the government and the beneficiary for the reconstruction task. Thus the bottom line was *choice* to the beneficiary.

- *Participatory Approach:* Participation of the community was the key element in the housing reconstruction programme. In case of relocation of an affected village, the *gram sabha's* approval of the identified relocation site was mandatory.

- *Decentralized Approach:* The reconstruction programme extended across 21 districts; hence a decentralized approach for implementation was used. The programme was coordinated by the concerned district collectors/district development officers at the district level and by the talukdars/taluka development officers at the taluka level.

- *Rights of Women:* Registration of the reconstructed house under the joint ownership of husband and wife was made mandatory.

- *Insurance:* All reconstructed houses were insured against risk from fourteen different hazards including earthquake, cyclone and fire.

- *Multi-hazard-resistant Construction:* The reconstructed houses were multi-hazard resistant.

- *Quality Control:* To keep tabs on the

quality of construction, a two-pronged approach was put in place. The amount of assistance to the beneficiary (except G1 category) was given in two or three instalments. The final instalment was released only after quality certification by the concerned engineer.

- *Third-party Quality Audit:* Apart from inspection and certification by the engineer, the National Council for Cement and Building Materials (NCCBM) was hired as an independent quality-audit agency. All reconstructed houses were audited by the agency at various stages of reconstruction and reports submitted to the concerned district administration and the GSDMA for ratification.

- *Material Banks:* Material banks were set up so that the beneficiaries could get cement at an affordable price. Materials were procured by negotiating directly with the manufacturers, with sales-tax exemptions. This ensured that the beneficiaries got materials at a reduced price. Nearly 1,180 material banks were established and more than 18.5 million cement bags disbursed.

- *Town Planning/Development Plan:* The four worst-affected towns of Kachchh are being reconstructed as state-of-the-art towns. High-quality infrastructure is being laid in the old unplanned and unregulated towns. Development plans have been prepared with a fifty-year perspective and town planning with twenty years' growth in view. The urban infrastructure of ten



Bhuj: Unplanned



Bhuj: After town planning

towns is being reconstructed with upgraded facilities.

- *Training:* The multi-hazard-resistant reconstruction task could not possibly be completed in the stipulated time with the existing numbers of engineers and masons; hence massive training programmes were undertaken. More than 6,000 engineers and 26,000 masons were trained.

- *Other Features:* The assistance amount was disbursed through unambiguous guidelines and hence there was very little grievance. The affected houses were classified into five categories according to the severity of damage: from G1 buildings, with minor damages like half-inch cracks, to G5 buildings, with more than 50% of the structure damaged. However, resurveys were also done when any beneficiary asked for it. Assistance was calculated on the basis of damage/carpet area of the affected house. The ceiling amount for assistance was fixed in different packages. For example, cash assistance was provided up to a ceiling of Rs 1.75 lakh for house reconstruction in urban areas, and up to Rs 90,000 for rural houses.

### Initiatives for Public Infrastructure Restoration

- *Health:* 2,400 health-facility structures were taken up for repair and another 500 health facilities for reconstruction. The Government of India has constructed a state-of-the-art, 300-bed, multi-hazard-resistant civil hospital with base-isolation technology at a cost of Rs 100 crore.

- *Education:* Reopening of educational institutions in the earthquake-affected areas helped in the process of bringing normalcy at the earliest. 44,215 classrooms were repaired and 12,302 reconstructed. The Bhuj Engineering College and Bhuj Polytechnic are being reconstructed.

- *Public Buildings:* These include buildings of general administration, urban local bodies, the home department, panchayat offices and heritage structures. Multi-hazard-resistance

features have been incorporated in all the reconstructed public buildings. Some have also been fitted with rainwater-harvesting systems. Over 12,000 public buildings are being restored.

- *Roads and Bridges:* It was planned to restore the roads and bridges to their pre-earthquake condition and strengthen them to withstand increased vehicular load due to the heavy traffic engaged in reconstruction work. 179 bridges and over 4,900 km of roads are being strengthened.

- *Dams:* Dam-safety review panels were constituted to review and evaluate the design, planning and construction and to ensure the recovery and upgradation of dams damaged by the earthquake as per the latest relevant standards and design criteria. The emergency repair of all 245 affected dams is complete and 222 dams are being strengthened.

- *Water Supply:* Restoration of the water-supply system was extremely important for ensuring health and hygiene, and hence 20 schemes involving laying of 2,700 km of pipelines and drilling of 222 tube wells to supply water to 41 towns and 1,762 villages/hamlets were undertaken.

- *Power:* It was planned to replace redundant and damaged equipment to ensure reliable functioning of power transmission and distribution systems and to improve system efficiency. Over 9,000 km of transmission and distribution lines are being strengthened.

### Initiatives for Livelihood Restoration and Social Rehabilitation

The prime objective of livelihood programmes and social rehabilitation is not merely restoration of livelihood; rather, long-term viability or sustainability is the key.

- *Social Rehabilitation:* The real human face of the programme has been social rehabilitation of women, orphans, and the handicapped, destitute and aged. Apart from Rs 2 lakh kept in joint accounts of the collector and each orphan child, the state government has

also evolved a monthly assistance scheme for 1,758 orphan children. Special pension is being provided to 999 widows and 651 old people. *Bal* and *balika kutirs* (homes for children) and old age homes for the aged have been created. The handicapped have been provided with employment/upgradation of skills, apart from injury assistance. 3,017 supportive devices were provided to disabled people.

- **Livelihood Restoration:** In order to restore the livelihood of the affected people, over US\$ 15 million (approx. Rs 675 million) have been spent. The six packages provided under this scheme have been summarized in Table 2.

Package 1	Tool kits to artisans
Package 2	Looms to handloom weavers
Package 3	Tool kits to handicraft artisans
Package 4	Loan subsidy to self-employed persons
Package 5	Tools to masons
Package 6	Working-capital assistance to handloom weavers

Table 2: Packages for livelihood restoration

- **Women's Livelihood:** Women's Livelihood Restoration Project (WLRP) was started to ensure that 20,000 women in 15 talukas of the worst-affected districts would have access to a range of services related to their livelihoods. The key feature was capacity-building, enabling women to earn more on a sustainable basis, and thus empowering them.

- **Self-employment Activities:** Women have been assisted as per their requirement of working-capital assistance, revolving funds or entrepreneurial skills. Four projects have been especially taken up with the objective of spreading the movement of cooperatives and best practices in the milk sector. These activities have created self-employment opportunities for 5,000 poor women. Some important activities



Women engaged in handicraft activity

covered in the programme are: paper-dish and -cup making; broom making; flour mills; machine embroidery; cotton carding; handloom; catering services; tiffin services; Rexine-bag stitching; production of potato and banana chips; manufacture of toys from plaster of Paris and plastic articles reinforced with fibreglass; and masala making.

- **Self-Help Groups (SHG):** These were formed to encourage savings and credit activities. Internal lending has commenced in 70 SHGs. The process of opening of bank accounts by SHGs has been initiated, and awareness training, covering the principles and philosophy of SHGs and the importance of savings and credit, has been given to 146 SHGs.

- **Industries:** Several schemes were launched for the industrial sector. These included: loans for repair and reconstruction; re-scheduling of loans; early disposal of insurance claims; general and interest subsidies to industrial units; financial assistance to small industrial units (including cabins and shops), and service and trade units. Exemption from lease rent and royalty on salt production was provided in the affected areas.

- **Agriculture:** Assistance was provided in the form of input kits and financial assistance for rehabilitation of farm structures and irrigation assets. Input kits included tarpaulin sheets, agricultural spray pumps, farming equipment, storage bins, seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides.





*Training of masons*

### **Initiative for Capacity-building**

A large number of masons were required for reconstruction of private houses/buildings and other infrastructure in the earthquake-affected areas. To ensure that the newly constructed buildings were multi-hazard resistant, and also as part of long-term disaster-management capacity-building, the Gujarat government trained several thousand masons. These masons were trained through institutions such as the National Council of Cement and Building Material (NCCBM) and through NGOs, DRDs, and also through the Directorate of Employment and Training.

- *Competency-based Masons' Certification:* A competency-based masons' certification programme has been started to create a pool of masons in the state whose competence is well established and also to establish masonry as a recognized trade requiring well-defined skills and discourage the rampant practice of unskilled labourers working as masons. The programme also looks forward to fostering a sense of pride in their trade among masons and improving the safety standards in the construction trade. The certification programme comprises a test of three sets of skills, designated as core, basic and advanced skills. A detailed training module covering these skills has been developed. The Gujarat Council of Vocational Training, based on the guidelines provided by the GSDMA is the assessment authority for the masons.

- *Training of Engineers:* Training programmes were conducted for supervisory engineers deployed in the earthquake-affected region.

Specialized training was provided to government engineers, private practitioners and engineers working with NGOs covering seismic design of RCC buildings, earthquake-resistant design, seismic design of bridges, repair and rehabilitation of RCC structures, architectural concern in seismic design of buildings, and repair of low-rise domestic buildings and strengthening them against earthquake-induced damage. Over 50 training programmes were conducted to train over 6,000 engineers in the above topics. Further, more than a dozen workshops were conducted on these issues.

- *Technical Materials and Guidelines:* Over one million pamphlets on safe repair and reconstruction methods in housing were distributed in the earthquake-affected areas. In addition to this, several manuals were prepared. The following guidelines were widely circulated and made available to the agencies and individuals involved in the reconstruction: (1) Two general guidelines—*Nirdeshika I and II*; (2) Guidelines on construction of cyclone-resistant buildings; (3) Guidelines on construction of compressed stabilized earthen-wall buildings; (4) Guidelines on repair, restoration and retrofitting of masonry buildings; (5) Guidelines on reconstruction and new constructions in the earthquake-affected areas of Kachchh; (6) Guidelines for control on quality of construction in the earthquake-affected areas of Gujarat

### **Community-based Disaster-risk Management Programme**

This programme is being implemented in association with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 14 most hazard-prone districts of the state, covering more than 4,000 villages from 50 talukas. The goal of the programme is long-term capacity-building within the community and reduction in dependence on external sources. This is a big step towards making the entire disaster-management programme a community-centric activity. It aims at identifying youth volunteers from the villages and preparing multiple teams for

community-level disaster response. These teams, viz., the Early-warning Group, the First-aid and Medical Group, the Evacuation Group, the Rescue Group and the Shelter-management Group will be responsible for different tasks assigned to them as part of disaster preparedness.

A programme on 'Sustainable Community Initiative in Gujarat' has been launched in association with the United Nations Centre for Regional Development (UNCRD), Sustainable Environment and Ecological Development Society (SEEDS) and the Japanese group NGOs Kobe in 20 villages of Porbandar district. The activities undertaken include providing training to village-level officials and communities, conducting a survey for identification of masons for the masons' training programme and providing training and certification to masons.

### **Creation/Strengthening of Institutions for Disaster Management**

*Gujarat Institute of Disaster Management (GIDM):* The government of Gujarat is setting up an apex institute for training and capacity-building in disaster management so as to 'make available, to all stakeholders, the knowledge and skills required to develop individual competencies, cultivate an appropriate understanding and accomplish appropriate disaster-management activities, while establishing and strengthening overall disaster-management institutional capacities at and below the state level'.

GIDM's objective is to improve overall awareness of disasters, support the professional development of those who currently have or will have disaster-management responsibilities, and establish a network of corresponding disaster-research institutions and training programmes which will serve to keep GIDM at the cutting-edge of disaster education and research. It has started functioning from the State Administrative Training Institute, without waiting for separate infrastructure to be created.

*Emergency Response Centres (ERC):* The gov-

ernment of Gujarat is exploring the option of setting up Regional Response Centres, which will house the latest state-of-the-art search-and-rescue equipment and have highly qualified and skilled rescue teams. If a disaster exceeds the coping and response capability of the concerned district, these ERCs will be activated. The location of these centres will be decided after ascertaining the composite risk in terms of geographical areas in Gujarat. These ERCs can effectively respond to disasters. At present, the government of Gujarat is contemplating setting up such centres and the exact locations will be ascertained only after the completion of the study. During normal times, these centres will be actively involved in providing advanced training to firefighters and rescue workers in municipal corporations and municipalities and also to volunteers.

*Emergency Operations Centres (EOC):* Gujarat has a well-equipped state-level EOC and control rooms in all 25 districts and every taluka. In order to bring these at par with the facilities available in the control rooms of other developed countries, the state is in the process of strengthening/upgrading the existing EOCs at the state as well as district levels. State-of-the-art equipment for communications are also being provided to all 25 district EOCs.

*Initiative for Awareness:* The most difficult aspect of any long-term disaster management programme is the creation of awareness and understanding for mitigation and disaster preparedness in each and every citizen. After a major disaster, the rude shock of the disaster awakens people, but in the long run, this awareness is overshadowed and the need for disaster preparedness is slowly forgotten.

The GSDMA launched a massive awareness-creation campaign incorporating various Information, Education and Communication (IEC) related activities in the entire region. Almost all the available media of mass communication are being utilized for the purpose. The following are a few notable components of this campaign:

- Messages on hazard-resistant construction and retrofitting displayed on state transport buses plying in the affected areas.

- Advertisements in local newspapers explaining multi-hazard-resistant methodologies for construction of houses. Also the do's and don'ts related to various disasters.

- A disaster calendar with do's and don'ts.

- Shake-table demonstrations for inculcating the value of multi-hazard-resistant construction.

- Two technical cassettes on reconstruction and retrofitting of houses prepared and shown in public gatherings in several thousand villages.

- Street plays for inculcating a disaster-preparedness culture.

- Essay competition for children to increase awareness about earthquakes.

- Photography and videography competitions on destruction caused by earthquakes.

- Distribution of caps carrying messages of safe construction.

- 10 lakh pamphlets on safe housing repair and reconstruction distributed.

- Booklets on 'Guidelines Related to Multi-hazard-resistant Construction' distributed.

- The GSDMA coordinated with and involved about 100 NGOs in an awareness campaign, and opened a camp office in Bhuj town for this.

The theme underlying the above-mentioned initiatives is the bringing about of a disaster-preparedness culture in day-to-day life.

## Conclusion

The many lessons learnt and the best practices adopted in the Gujarat reconstruction programme may be used in other places for effective reconstruction and rehabilitation and for formulating long-term disaster-management programmes. Disaster management is a continuous activity. It is a process and has to be integrated with every other activity undertaken

by the government and the people. The initial awareness and focus soon gets lost in the problems of everyday life. The institutional mechanisms set up in Gujarat for long-term disaster-management capacity-building will help the government maintain focus and hence institutionalization of process is the key. The key lesson learnt from this process is that disaster-management capacity-building is not easy. It may take a decade or more to achieve a critical mass of people who are aware of all aspects of disaster management. \*

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# Coping with Disaster: I Think I Can Live Again

DR SHONALI SUD

Better than a thousand hollow words is one word that brings peace.

—*Buddha*

Not much is known about how life actually began; yet it is believed that life had its origin somewhere in the oceans.<sup>1</sup> Social scientists have been striving for ages to solve the fascinating mystery of existence in order to make life more comfortable and peaceful. And the clock of existence has definitely taught us that the very essence of survival lies not only in problem solving but also in efficient handling of emergencies. Emergency situations arise when disasters strike. The very word *disaster* spells destruction, distress and suffering. Visualize somebody caught in a situation where there is that desperate urge to crawl out and breathe, and you get a glimpse of the devastating psychological impact of disasters.

Disasters can happen to anyone, at any time and at any place, irrespective of the developmental status of the country, and for most of the two billion years that life has existed on earth, it has been tormented by disasters of all kinds. Times without number disasters have struck humans and almost always they have fought back, and thus life has moved on. The ultimate catastrophe is, of course, ecological extinction, which is nothing but the complete elimination of a species from the earth. This is the extreme measure of damage that can possibly be inflicted on humans. But worse still is the situation where humans lose that divine gift of resilience or the will to bounce back from hopelessness to health, vitality and cheerfulness. There can hardly be a greater disaster, for loss of the will to live is a sure invitation to death. This certainly is a cause for great concern and this is where psychologists can offer remedial measures.

Disasters are of various kinds and they affect millions of people worldwide. They can be

natural or man-made. Natural disasters range from floods, cyclones and tsunamis to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Man-made disasters include vehicular accidents, technological disasters like industrial accidents, criminal and sexual assaults as well as terrorist attacks and military raids. Whatever be their nature, all disasters lead to trauma, and it is a well-accepted fact that trauma leads to stress and anxiety which are severely debilitating. Again, all kinds of trauma affect the process of recovery, sometimes hampering it to such an extent that the victim is rendered cripple.

## Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

The normal psychological response to the trauma of disaster passes through five phases: 1) the initial impact phase, in which there is a situation of anxiety and specific fears; 2) a heroic phase, where many people may exhaust themselves in trying to deal with the calamity; 3) a phase of disillusionment, when one feels that officials and other agencies have not done enough to help in a timely manner; 4) a reorganization phase, which is generally accompanied by mental and emotional reconstruction; and 5) a state of repose, characterized by gratitude and joy at having at least survived and at having received assistance from others.

The process of recovery from the trauma of disaster can be delayed or made difficult by a psychological condition known as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD was officially recognized for the first time in 1987 in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association. The condition may be acute or chronic, depending upon the time of onset. Acute PTSD develops soon after the trauma and does not last for more than six months, whereas the

delayed variety appears after a while and lasts more than six months.

The diagnosis of PTSD is essentially based on the following criteria:

a) Experiencing or reliving the trauma (in a manner that was not present prior to the trauma) in the form of memory flashbacks, sleep disturbances, a hyper-exaggerated startle response, or impairment in concentration. The victims may feel that the world is slowly closing in on them or that they are being pursued by horrifying forces trying to strangle and annihilate them.

b) Emotional anaesthesia or 'numbing'. This may present as a blank expressionless face, loss of interest in all activities, and absence of the zest to live.

c) A sense of intense fear, helplessness or horror when exposed to situations resembling or symbolic of the traumatic stressor. This is reflected in a general avoidance of situations, people or places that are even remotely associated with the traumatic event. The development of this nonchalant attitude of avoidance rather than acceptance of and coming to grips with reality is actually a maladaptive response, much like unconsciously befooling oneself.<sup>2</sup>

PTSD is a medically recognized disorder that occurs in normal individuals under extremely stressful conditions. It can affect people from any walk of life and its symptoms can at times be so damaging that survivors are unable to live normal lives again. It goes without saying that disasters are situations of extreme stress, and stress causes distress. It is perhaps these feelings of distress, despair and helplessness coupled with a lowered coping capacity that weighs down heavily on the victims, leaving them submerged under an iceberg of several dysfunctional emotional, physical/behavioural, cognitive and interpersonal reactions.

Emotional reactions vary from irritability, terror, shock, agitation, guilt, anxiety and sadness to numbness or total emotional apathy. Physical and behavioural problems include decreased energy or general lassitude, muscle ten-

sion, problems in sleeping, increased stomach and intestinal problems, shortness of breath, becoming jumpy and a greater vulnerability to illness. Cognitive complications include impaired concentration, decreased self-esteem, lowered decision-making ability, disbelief, confusion, nightmares, and dissociation or dream-like 'spacy' feelings. Interpersonal problems manifest as social withdrawal, alienation, reduced relational intimacy, impaired work performance, decreased satisfaction, distrust, feelings of being abandoned and neglected, and becoming overprotective of oneself and one's family.

Just ruminate on this for a while: A little after 9:30 a.m. on the balmy autumn morning of 8 October 2005 the giant lower Himalayan belt in Kashmir suddenly decided to sway, rudely jolting thousands who had woken up from a peaceful slumber just a while ago. The earth cruelly swallowed up thousands of little heads that had just set out for school to master the three R's, thousands who never knew that it would be their last breakfast, thousands who never got the time to bid that sweet goodbye to their loved ones, thousands who never realized that the world would come crashing down in seconds, thousands lost into oblivion with hopes vanquished and dreams snuffed out. Such was the painful sight after that devastating earthquake, with thousands gasping to breathe again, aching to live again—reduced to puny, helpless creatures quaking like dry autumn leaves with every aftershock that ripped through their quivering land.

Such is the impact of any disaster, and it is immediately and invariably accompanied by large-scale PTSD. How does one fight, or better still, cope with, this terrible wrath of nature? How does one wipe off that deep furrow of agony and grief from the mind? How does one combat something that is beyond one's level of control?

After every disaster human altruism comes to the fore and people reach out to fellow victims with basic survival needs like food, shelter

and clothing, and immediate efforts are made at socio-economic rehabilitation. Yet all these efforts are not enough. In spite of all the help and support that survivors receive, they continue to wear that bleak garb of misery. This is further reinforced by negative self-debilitating imagery, irrational rumination and magnification of possible threats and dangers. Some common response patterns witnessed are: 'Life is all over for me', 'No use living any more', 'Why must I strive to live on?', 'What do I have to look forward to?', 'It is a bleak life ahead for me now' and 'I deserve to suffer this wrath of God'. Such destructive thoughts add to the distress and lead to slower recovery and poor functioning.<sup>3</sup> In such a scenario of diminishing hopes and self-condemnatory attitudes, how can disaster victims be helped to come to terms with and reconcile themselves to reality? Can self-efficacy provide an answer?

### What is Self-efficacy?

Bandura, who introduced the concept of self-efficacy almost three decades ago,<sup>4</sup> offered one of the best remedial measures for recovery from disaster trauma. Self-efficacy is one of the best personal resource mechanisms that can help with self-sustenance. Self-efficacy is nothing but the belief in one's capacity to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources and courses of action needed to meet situational demands.<sup>5</sup> It involves instillation of beliefs such as: 'I think I can', 'I can do it', 'I can fight it', 'It is all within me', and 'I am capable enough'. These kinds of positive thoughts and beliefs awaken a desire to bounce back to one's normal state of behaviour or a functional level better than before. In Bandura's own words: 'Nothing is more central or pervasive than peoples' beliefs in their efficacy to manage their own functioning and to express control over events that affect their lives.'<sup>6</sup> This suggests that a person who believes in being able to produce a desired effect does pursue a more active and self-determined course of life. In fact, such a person feels sufficiently motivated to persevere in the face of dif-

ficulties. (S)he thinks in a self-enhancing way. Self-efficacy thus makes a difference in how people feel, think, and act. It is a belief or expectation of being efficacious, of being able to produce intended outcomes with one's actions.<sup>7</sup> Hence self-efficacy is directly related to the maintenance of health. It is associated with the desire to become conscious of what a healthy lifestyle is in contrast to an unhealthy one. Needless to say, when disasters occur, self-efficacy gives victims the assurance to approach threatening situations with confidence so that they can overcome them. An efficacious outlook produces personal accomplishments, reduces stress and lowers vulnerability to depression.<sup>8</sup> Self-efficacy has been found to lower acute mental distress as well.<sup>9</sup>

During a crisis, how does one cope and overcome the threat? The best strategy is to efficiently utilize one's coping skills or coping self-efficacy. Coping self-efficacy is defined as a person's subjective appraisal of his/her ability to cope with the environmental demands of the stressful situation. High coping self-efficacy has been related to better psychological adjustment to severe environmental stressors such as volcanic eruptions,<sup>10</sup> military combat,<sup>11</sup> physical assault,<sup>12</sup> bombing,<sup>13</sup> and hurricanes.<sup>14</sup> It has also been associated with less emotional distress among battered women<sup>15</sup> and better post-traumatic recovery.<sup>16</sup> Hence PTSD, which poses a major public-health challenge in today's world, is well combated by enhancing the self-efficacy of potential or actual victims. Self-efficacy has an embalming effect. It has also been shown to play an agentive role.<sup>17</sup> This means that it acts as an agent bringing about a change in the victims' way of functioning and in his or her ability to deal with life's circumstances. It thus provides a protective shield to individuals by promoting adaptation to changed circumstances. Disaster results in rapid resource depletion<sup>18</sup> and self-efficacy controls resource loss by facilitating optimistic orientation.<sup>19</sup>

Disasters have long-lasting detrimental effects on victims, affecting both their physical

and mental health. A survey of remedial measures points towards a glaring lacuna in catering to the psychological needs of victims. One's well-being and mental health can best be looked after by enhancing one's level of self-efficacy through positive thinking so that one is mentally equipped to overcome the agony and shattering realization of personal loss following a crisis. This personal realization and effort to master and overcome a crisis is imperative for social growth. In simple terms: 'It is all within us'; only this realization has to dawn, and we may be helped in this by Emerson's suggestion: 'It becomes necessary to accept the truth, [and] it is one of the most beautiful compensations of life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.' \*

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# Doctors without Borders

SWAMI AMARANANDA

It was mainly a group of disgruntled doctors and other staff commissioned by the Red Cross between 1968 and 1970 that founded the organization called Doctors Without Borders (in French, Médecins Sans Frontières or MSF). Before coming to the tale of these peeved physicians, let us begin from the inception of the Red Cross.

Mr Henri Dunant, a young entrepreneur of Geneva in Switzerland, wanted water rights for his financial and industrial company in Algeria. So, in 1859, he was seeking an interview with Napoleon III of France. The emperor was at the head of the army in Italy to help the Sardinian emperor defeat the invading Austrians. Napoleon III had just won the battle of Solferino, and that very evening of 24 June Henry arrived near the battlefield at Castiglione on his business mission.

When Henri arrived, it was daylight still, the day being proximate to the summer solstice. He saw the horrific suffering of the wounded brought to Castiglione from the nearby battlefield. He gathered the distressing news: There were about 29,000 dead or wounded on the battlefield, a total of more than 11,000 missing soldiers, and many wounded soldiers had been shot at on both sides. Plans for business subsided in Henri's mind; he organized relief for the wounded in Castiglione as best as he could, returned to Geneva and published a slim volume called *A Memory of Solferino* in 1862.

The book has three themes: the battle at Solferino; the pitiable condition of soldiers after the battle and caring for the wounded in Castiglione (where local women nursed the wounded of all nations with the idea of *tutti fratelli*, that 'all are brothers'); and the following momentous proposal of Henri's which has made him immortal: 'Would it not be possible

to form relief societies, in times of peace and tranquillity, of which the goal should be to arrange for the nursing of the wounded during wars, the nursing to be done by those who are well qualified for such a job and who possess zeal and devotion?' This was the question Henri raised in his book. In 1864, his idea led to the formation of an international society which later became known as the Red Cross.

The impact of the Solferino battle on Henry reminds us inevitably of that on Ashoka after the battle of Dhaulagiri (the two bloodbaths are chronologically 2,120 years apart) in which the casualties were much more: about 250,000 soldiers dead or wounded. When the victorious Indian emperor Ashoka surveyed the battlefield, his mind became full of repentance and compassion. He found his solace in the teachings of Buddha. As a result of this transformation, a tide of moral and social uplift swept over the civilized world of those days.

## Birth of MSF

In the year 1968, a group of fifty doctors from the French Red Cross went to help the secessionist Igbo tribals who had created the state of Biafra in the south-eastern part of Nigeria. They were bolstered by the presence of the French gastroenterologist Mr Bernard Kouchner. After thirty months of battle, on 12 January 1970, the besieged Igbos, suffering from famine and disease, surrendered to the federal forces, which had received help from the UK, USA and USSR. Conservative estimates put the death toll at Biafra at more than one million. The French doctors returned to Paris. They were not happy regarding the Red Cross's policy of remaining silent on the issue of human rights violation by the Nigerian government.

Just ten months later, on 12 November

1970, a tidal wave swept over Bhola in East Pakistan. This has been designated as the biggest killer among the tidal waves of the last century. Nearly 500,000 people died. Some French doctors from the Red Cross went to Bhola. They also returned unhappy, because the Red Cross paid, according to them, an irritating deference to international laws, which hampered relief operations. This double unrest of French Red Cross doctors with experience in Biafra and Bhola led to the creation of the Groupe d'Intervention Medical et Chirurgicale d'Urgence or GIMCU, which was independent of the Red Cross.

At about this time, on 23 November, the editor of the French medical journal *Tonus* published an appeal to create an organization called Secours Medical Français (French Medical Relief) or SMF. Many doctors responded to this appeal. On 20 December 1970, GIMCU and SMF merged to form Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) or MSF with Mr Kouchner as its president.

From 1976 to 1979, MSF helped Angolan refugees in Congo, Somali refugees in Djibouti, Saharan refugees in Algeria and Eritrea, and Indo-Chinese refugees in Thailand. Initially, MSF modestly helped organizations like the International Rescue Committee and World Vision, who had been in the field for more than a year. But soon the French doctors began to question the real motives of the organizations they aided and suspected that they had hidden agenda like promotion of anti-communism and conversion to Christianity. So MSF started helping the people in Indo-China directly.

MSF attracted public attention in 1977 when its war mission in Lebanon was freely advertised by an ad agency. It worked in Lebanon in a Shiite neighbourhood under siege by Christian militia.

Mr Kouchner's disciple Mr C Malhuret became the president of MSF in 1977. The difference in the ideas and ways of conducting relief between the guru and the disciple began to create an internal tension in MSF. In 1979, Mr

Kouchner sent a hospital ship, *l'Île de Lumière*, with doctors and journalists on board to help thousands of boat people fleeing from South Vietnam, which had fallen to the communists. The mission was successful and received world attention, but it triggered a severe rift between Mr Kouchner and the majority of MSF members. This programme was criticized for being highly interventionist, logistically deficient and launched without much democratic discussion. Along with fifteen doctors Mr Kouchner left MSF; and within a few months, in March 1980, he launched Médecins du Monde. *Time* magazine wrote about him: 'This humanitarian breaks taboos and reveals matters that render us sleepless. Faced with globalized inhumanity burning the 21st century, he is introducing a new humanism without geographical or political borders. He does it not to open the gates of paradise, but to bolt the gates of hell.' Indeed, he had already left an indelible legacy in favour of MSF when he chose to come out of it.

The lack of entente between Kouchner and Malhuret has its similarity and contrast with that occurring in the nineteenth century between Henri and Mr G Moynier, the then head of the Geneva Society for Public Welfare. Mr Moynier did not think that Henri's idea of granting neutrality to wounded soldiers and to the caring staff was feasible. But Henri, through his lobbying throughout Europe, realized his dream in 1864. This annoyed Mr Moynier so much that he would utilize his position as president to make Henri resign from the international committee of the would-be Red Cross and foil all attempts of foreign friends to relieve Henri of his debt. On the other hand, Mr Kouchner is still active, holds an honourable position, did not face a mean adversary in the person of Mr Malhuret, and lives in comparative affluence.

### Post-Kouchner Evolution of MSF

The new executive of MSF brought increased financial independence by adopting the policy of fund-raising by mail. Since several

years, it has set a rule that at least half of the funds raised must come from private sources. In the 1980s operational sections were opened in Belgium and Switzerland (1981), Holland (1984), and Spain (1986). As complements to these centres, support centres were opened in Luxembourg (1986), Greece (1990), Canada (1991), Japan (1992), UK and Italy (1993), Australia (1994) and gradually in many more countries. The US centre is very helpful in the collection of funds. In order to bring about cohesion among the national sections, the missions sent out to different distress zones are composed of staff drawn from various nations. Moreover, directors of national sections meet regularly to decide upon the strategy of relief. In 1990, both an international council and an international secretariat were created in Geneva.

The success in fund-raising led MSF to encourage participation as well as staff stability. It began to pay salaries to staff doctors at the headquarters, and travel allowances and stipends to doctors on long-term missions to different countries. Technical units began to grow at the headquarters. Better screening and orientation training became part of the recruitment policy. Once selected for recruitment, candidates are put on a reserve list. Moreover, a full-time logistics manager was appointed in Paris. (S)he is assisted by a few experts.

There are radio links between headquarters and the field. Satellite-transmission dishes arrive in the field with the staff. Transportation has been ameliorated in collaboration with another sans frontier organization called Aviation Sans Frontières. MSF has developed a series of medical and logistical kits that could be com-

bined to meet the particularity of a given crisis. The combination contains an emergency health kit, and vaccination and surgical kits. All kit materials are carefully selected and tested. The combination is supplemented by additional modules to adapt to the need of a peculiar situation. In the winter of 1997-98, the logistical improvement was put to a test: MSF could set up cholera-treatment centres in seven African countries by sending supplementary kits within forty-eight hours of the first signs of a big epidemic.

The medical protocol created by MSF is impressive. They have about forty books of guidelines covering basic medical practice and specialities such as surgery and ophthalmology. They have expertise in nutrition and vaccination. Moreover, they have water and sanitation units, which are so very essential in camp-life situations.

Mr I Younnis, who led the first MSF team to Aceh in Sumatra on 28 December 2004 with 3.5 tons of medical and other relief materials, is attached to the operational centre in Brussels. He told me: 'Within seventy-two hours of a big disaster anywhere in the world, we can handle

victims numbering from 15,000 to 20,000 with good, standard kits. We have international staff that collaborates with locally available personnel. They have medical protocols similar to those issued by the WHO, but in many respects, clinical and practical, they are better than the WHO publications.'

MSF has also created affiliated organizations to carry out research in several specific domains: Epicentre in Paris for epidemiological research and evaluation of the work of MSF and other aid organizations; European Agency for



*Attending to children in the deserts of Mauritania*

Health and Development (French acronym AEDES) in Belgium for emergency project management with priority of technical-know-how transmission in all fields touching health-service management; and Healthnet International, founded with the support of MSF, in Holland to supply bridging assistance from chaos to a minimal structure of health and social services in the aftermath of a crisis when the situation is still unstable.

### Clandestine Work and Speaking Out

MSF was born out of a righteous rage concerning the policy of silence and strict adherence to the sanctity of international borders adopted by the Red Cross, which wants to guard its neutrality.

In 1980 MSF began to work clandestinely in Afghanistan. For ten years, in close collaboration with other French organizations, MSF doctors and nurses totalling 550 worked in relays to provide medical care to ailing Afghans. In 1986 I myself witnessed a few Afghan women living in Paris in the home of one person working clandestinely in Afghanistan.

For the first thirteen years of its existence, MSF hardly criticized a government publicly. In the fall of 1984, it realized that the Ethiopian government was pursuing its resettlement programme with forced transfer of people from north to south to weaken the political movement of the Eritrean people, using international aid as a bait to lure people to the south. It requested the government to stop its programme. The government responded by expelling MSF from the country. The outcry caused by this expulsion provoked the EEC and USA to make further aid conditional on the discon-

tinuance of the resettlement programme. Within a year, Ethiopia had to yield.

On several occasions, the US Congress invited MSF to testify on various issues: genocide in Rwanda (one million people killed in three months), landmines in Afghanistan, and the 1996-97 refugee crisis in Congo. In 1997, along with other aid organizations, MSF presented before the UN Security Council its own analysis of the refugee crisis in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

At the very outset of his 1999 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, the then president of MSF appealed to Russia to stop its indiscriminate bombardment in Chechnya.

Last year MSF published a report about the sexual violence on women in Darfur. The Sudanese government arrested two senior MSF staff in Darfur. They were charged with publishing false information. Protests from international humanitarian workers forced the government to release the

staff.

Increasingly, there are situations where MSF needs jurists on its staff. For example, the 'Arjan crisis' was precipitated when the MSF team leader in Dagestan, Arjan Erkel, was kidnapped by a group of extremists in August 2002. Arjan's release was secured after nearly two years following the payment of a huge ransom by the Dutch government. Subsequently, the Dutch government dragged MSF to court to recover the amount. Ostensibly, the Dutch government does not want to be seen as paying ransom to extremists, while MSF cannot afford to have aid money channelled into ransom. But there have been suggestions that there is more to this than what meets the eye. The matter is



*Mental-health outreach for children exposed to violence in Nigeria*

sub judice.

## Achievements

The first achievement is the public image which led to the conferment of the Nobel Prize. It is this image, again, that has ensured a steady rise in public support. MSF is noted for its intervention in war zones where they are normally the last to leave. (They left certain war zones only when the security of their staff became totally uncertain.) It has coupled idealism with pragmatism in a successful way. Here is an instance in the context of tsunami relief. I quote from an MSF press release dated 22 December 2005:

Throughout its intervention (in tsunami-relief operation), MSF has remained determined that its programmes be driven by need alone, and not by a desire to spend surplus funds. Perhaps the most controversial decision MSF made during the tsunami response was to stop accepting funds which could be used to help victims of the tsunami less than a week after the disaster.

Despite this announcement, in an extraordinary outpouring of solidarity, MSF sections received in total 110 million euros while a forecast indicated that 25 million euros would be sufficient to run programmes for the rest of 2005. MSF decided to contact its donors, asking their permission to derestrict their donations so that they could be used for other emergencies and forgotten crises. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Of all the people contacted, 1% have asked for their money to be refunded rather than redirected.

By the end of 2005, MSF will have used 90.1 million euros or 82% of the tsunami donations to fund its operations in the tsunami region (24.7 million euros) and to meet urgent needs in other emergencies and forgotten crises (65.4 million euros) such as the nutritional crisis in Niger, the conflict in Darfur and the earthquake in Pakistan.

In my judgement, the transfer of money collected in the name of tsunami relief to other programmes with the consent of the donors has been a highly pragmatic way of saving money for forgotten people.

## Preoccupations of MSF Today

MSF's main preoccupation is with Africa, specially black Africa, where life has become unbearable for millions because of many contributing factors: high corruption, ongoing armed conflicts among warlords resulting in great volumes of refugees, high percentage of illiteracy, traditional conservatism, lack of women's liberty and security, and diseases like falciparum malaria, multi-drug-resistant TB, AIDS, cholera, etc. One must add to it the lot of about 130 million African girls and women who suffer from the widespread practice of different types of female circumcision as well as sexual abuse.

The president of MSF wrote recently in the context of the work in Congo: 'What shocks me is that 77% of rape victims who presented themselves to MSF in the last six months were raped by two or more assailants. I find these figures horrific and disgraceful.'

In the 1990s, many parts of the former USSR and eastern Europe have come out of the communist system. Many of them exist today with the lives of their citizens precarious in the absence of any stable system. Iraq and Afghanistan have suffered due to war. From Pakistan to Indo-China, and in China as well, vast populations are living below the poverty line. There are two million people living in the slums of Rio de Janeiro. Poverty is prevalent in most countries of Latin and Central America.

According to Mr Younnis, about 23% of MSF's budget is spent in Latin America and Europe, while 13% of it is spent in Asia. The main spending is in favour of Africa. A fair estimate about the global budget of MSF would be around 400 million US dollars (exact figures are not available from MSF sources).

## The Ramakrishna Order and MSF

In the Kouchner era, MSF was marked by amateurism and romanticism, and the staff was predominantly medical and paramedical. But that was never the case in the last 109 years of organized relief done by the Ramakrishna Or-

der.

The distress relief done by MSF is being carried out in about ninety-two countries today (the figure fluctuates because when the situation becomes stable MSF leaves the country), where more than 250 projects are in hand. MSF has long-term missions in many of the countries they serve. The Ramakrishna Order may learn from many aspects of MSF's professionalism in the post-Kouchner era, but neither can it reach the distressed in the whole world, nor can it take in those elements of logistics which are costly.

MSF works in many risky zones. For example, the Swiss branch lost five of their colleagues in Afghanistan, where they were assassinated in June 2004. As a result, MSF has stopped its mission there. Similarly, the Ramakrishna Order had to permanently stop all its activities in West Pakistan fifty-eight years ago, when the country was following a policy of religious cleansing vis-a-vis non-Abrahamic faiths. Again, in 1971, when the 38-week-long civil war was going on in East Pakistan, we abandoned our activities temporarily in that country. Earlier, in 1960's we wound up our mission in Burma when the military junta there wanted to take away our independence in running our centres. Seldom has our Order clashed with the local administration anywhere.

The psychological support which MSF gives traumatized persons (including street children), is something worth emulating. They are now doing it for quake victims in Kashmir. This service is given by some of our swamis to a few individuals, but there is a need of developing our organizational capacity in this respect.

MSF, like us, does not discriminate on grounds of religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, etc. True, we do not have the monetary power of MSF. But in spite of its worldwide prestige, MSF does not have one great asset that we possess. Our main advantage in the national context is that the name of Swami Vivekananda elicits spontaneous admiration from the majority of Indians across religious and cultural divi-

sions in the vast subcontinent that is India. Even the communists generally admire him, though they are not yet ready to take up his spiritual ideas.

More than 7.5 million cases were treated, at a comparatively low administrative cost, at the health facilities run by our Order in the year ended March 2005. The amount of our annual medical service that year, in monetary terms, was worth 32.8 million pounds sterling. Taking into consideration that in India this service is eight times cheaper than in the UK, these figures are impressive. However, our relief operation is not simply medically oriented; it is comprehensive. In its purest form, it is a kind of spiritual adoration.

Swamis Saradananda, Shivananda, Abhedananda and others have pointed out that our service, started at the behest of Swami Vivekananda, is rooted in the mantra 'Jiva is Shiva', learnt by Swamiji at the feet of his guru Sri Ramakrishna. But this lesson became firmly implanted in Swamiji due to the mystic intuition following his deep meditation near Almora. Rightly has Swami Nirvedananda analysed this experience in his work *Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance*: 'His master's words about the identity of the Jiva and Shiva, which had appealed so long to his intellect, now became living in the flash-light of his own intuition. ... since his realisation at Almora about the divine harmony in nature, nothing could possibly make any breach between the spiritual yearning of his soul and the service of deified humanity.' The founders of our relief tradition—persons like Swamis Akhandananda and Sadananda and Sister Nivedita—were imbued with this idea of serving deified humanity. Swami Akhandananda was fond of repeating the following prayer of King Rantideva, a prayer of which his own life was an illustration: 'I covet neither kingdom, nor heaven, nor freedom from the law of transmigration. What I long for is the cessation of affliction of beings subject to suffering.'

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# Birds in Buddhist Sacred Texts

DR SURUCHI PANDE

(Continued from the previous issue)

Even during the period of the fifth Dalai Lama, a Khampa yogi named Druptob Tashi was said to have had the ability of transforming himself into a white vulture. He generously preached to other birds, particularly ones that subsisted on human corpses at sky-burial sites. These birds are believed to bless the corpses by tapping on them. In the *Precious Garland*, the vulture is said to have shaken his wings three times before speaking.

The vulture variety mentioned here may well be the Indian white-backed vulture, Eurasian griffon or the Egyptian vulture, all three of which can be termed white vultures. In the Gijjha Jataka<sup>8</sup> the Bodhisattva is shown to have become a vulture who was involved in a highly philosophical contemplation regarding fate—on the limits of our capacity when the moment of death becomes unavoidable.

After the vulture, the great crane came forward. It gave calls like '*srun dgos*; one must observe'. It said:

One must observe the need to abandon  
Whatever belongs to this world,  
and that includes  
The bonds of life in the various heavens.

Cranes have a unique place in Tibetan religious thought. The mother of the seventeenth Karma-pa had a dream during her pregnancy. Three white cranes offered her a bowl of yoghurt surmounted by a golden letter. The cranes told her that they were sent by Guru Rinpoche and that the letter was a token of rec-

ognition which indicated that the child was an incarnation.

The black-necked crane is limited in its distribution. It leaves the Tibetan plateau and flies to the lower zones of east Tibet, south China and Bhutan in winter. It is also known as the Tibetan crane. According to local belief, these cranes are sacred and they are considered reincarnated beings that have come back to our world to help other souls get enlightenment. This belief might be based on their disappearance during the migratory season. Its call is described as *krii-kroo*, *krii-kroo*. In chorus it chants *tuu-toe*, *diip-diip*, *tuu-toe*, *diip-diip*. This, of course, is different from *srun dgos*.

The golden goose seems to be a mythical bird, but it gave a philosophical message about what prolongs bondage. It said:

To desire emancipation,  
and still deserve a state of woe,  
That prolongs bondage.

Geese are related to ducks. The duck symbolically represents two eighth-century masters, Shantarakshita and his student Kamalashila. In the *thang-kas* (Tibetan religious paintings used as aids to meditation) there sometimes appear two double-headed birds representing the parrot and the duck.



Next came the raven. It said, ‘*grogs yon, grogs yon*’, and continued:

When you have performed the acts of worship  
Help will come from the guardian angels.

The calls of the common raven are *crroak* or *gronk*. Its local name is *kha-rok* or *phorok* in the Ladakh area.

Crows have played an important role in Tibetan mythology. They are associated with the protector Mahakala. In the case of the first Dalai Lama, Dge-dun-grub-pa, a pair of crows protected him when he was a baby. It is said in relation to the fourteenth Dalai Lama that his mother noticed a pair of crows outside, following his birth. It is accepted in Tibet that there is



a special relationship between the Dalai Lama and the crows. The raven is also believed to be the most auspicious bird and other black-coloured as well as carrion-

feeding birds benefit from this association. It was a raven that indicated to the fourth *tulku* (reincarnated lama) of the Sangye Nyenpa lineage the location for the reputed Benchen Monastery that is named after the deity Mahakala Bernachen. In India too the crow is supposed to be an auspicious omen that suggests the arrival of dear ones.

The little wagtail rose and called ‘*gtin rin*’. It described what deep and vast experiences were. For example:

Deep and vast, this ocean of ills,  
this world of samsara ...

Deep and vast, the fetters of love of self.

It is not clear from the term wagtail alone which species is indicated. In Sanskrit literature the grey wagtail, known as *khañjanaka*, was supposed to be an auspicious bird. Its sighting was taken as a good omen.

The next bird is the ruddy sheldrake, whose nesting sites are in Ladakh and Tibet. Its other name is brahminy duck because of its

rusty-brown colour. This bird features prominently in Sanskrit literature as the *cakravāka*. Much has been written in admiration of its beauty and fidelity. It is also



presented as a symbol of the grief of separation. (However, it is strongly suspected that the birds may actually form new pairs each year.) This duck expresses the view that

Without a good character one must do  
without companions.

Through the Chakkavaka Jataka (nos. 434 and 451), the Bodhisattva has taught us to avoid sinful acts.

Then the white grouse arose and explained the hardness of life by saying:

Hard to fathom the full extent of ills  
in this round of samsara.

The white grouse is a bird seen in coniferous forests.

After the grouse, the pigeon said, ‘*yi mug, yi mug*’, and further added:

Well might one despair, the quarrels  
of families in disunion!

Well might one despair, the absurdities  
of jealous neighbours!

This pigeon is most probably the blue rock pigeon. It is used to staying near human habitats. That is perhaps the reason why it is contemplating on the flaws in human behaviour. We referred earlier to Marpa transferring his soul to a pigeon. In the Kapota Jataka (nos. 42 and 274) we find the Bodhisattva trying to teach a greedy crow the lessons of morality.

Next the dove expressed its views. According to him

The quest for bliss in this samsaric world  
will lead to ills in a state of woe,  
The quest for bliss in family life  
will lead to untold ills [too].



The general name *dove* is used here. Most probably this refers to the oriental turtle dove or the spotted dove, which is very graceful.

The next reference is to the jackdaw. It says:

Leave behind this world of endless activity!  
Leave behind that desire to act, which brings  
unending weariness!

This species is a migratory visitor and has a call that is rather metallic: a short and musical clucking, *kya* or *chak*.

Then there appears the wise owl. It cannot be specifically said what kind of owl this is. But it talks about misery:

The hour of death without insight  
from meditation—what misery! ...  
An old lama without judgement—  
what misery!



The owl is seen to be sarcastically commenting on the hypocrisy in society. Though the sighting of an owl generates fear in the minds of people, the owl is actually the symbol of intellect.

The domestic cock warns us of the many obstacles and unhappiness in the world by saying:

Whilst you live this samsaric world,  
no lasting happiness can be yours—  
do you understand that?

Generally speaking, all types of larks have pleasant musical and chirping calls. The lark in this text is unhappy to see pleasure turning sour. She is weary at heart because of her countless rebirths. So she says:

After the births and deaths of the past,  
the pleasures  
expected from future rebirth turn sour.

The little red lagopus is a variety of ptarmigan, which laments because there is no certainty in this world. The red-beaked Chinese thrush is suggesting to us 'to profit from the

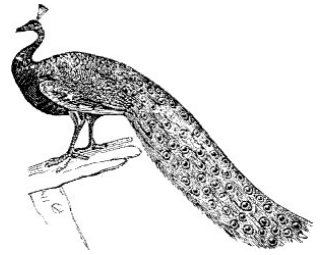
holy Dharma, and achieve your aims!'

Next comes forth the peacock, which represents the Indian birds. It categorically states the nature of loss by giving many examples. For instance:

If you cannot have the Good Law,  
yours is the loss of the Buddha.  
If you have no will to give, yours is the loss  
of pleasure in possessions.

### The Symbolism of the Peacock

The peacock has great symbolic meaning in Buddhism. The great deity Mahamayuri has a peacock for her vehicle. A particular dance troupe belonging to the Kagyupa sect imitates peacocks in their dances. As the peacock, though presenting a fine blend of all the colours of the spectrum, has a special display of green, the Tibetan culture views green as the mixture of all aspects. The peahen is one of the many epithets of the Green Tara (Janguli). Emanating from Akshobhya, she is green in colour and carries a peacock tail. Buddhists worship Janguli as a goddess who prevents and can also cure snakebites.<sup>9</sup> The Japanese deity Kujaku-Myo-o is also associated with the peacock. The sun-fan-like tail is supposed to be evocative of the wheel of Dharma, Buddha's teachings. According to the Buddhist tradition, blue, being the colour of the sky, represents *śūnya*. A special, archetypal relationship is shown between the peacock and Amitabha. The throne of Amitabha is supported by eight peacocks, one at each corner of the base. They reassure us that no matter what misdeeds one commits during one's lifetime, rebirth is possible in the pure land of Sukhavati. Six peacock feathers are arranged like a fan and used with sprinkling utensils for giving the blessing of purifying water in Tibetan Buddhist rituals. They are the symbol of compassion and



morality because of their capacity to absorb the poison of *kleṣas* or afflictions like anger, greed and ignorance. In the Mora, Mahamora and Baveru Jatakas<sup>10</sup> the Bodhisattva is born as a peacock and is revered by people.

Thus it can be seen that the peacock enjoys a religious importance in Buddhist as well as Hindu mythology.

After the peacock, the Indian kestrel shares in the philosophical discussion. It says:

Observe this man not content  
with what he has.

He will surely be crushed by his foes, ki ki.

Observe this man who ignores  
the fruits of his evil deeds.

He will surely go to hell, ki ki.

The *ki ki* sound perfectly reproduces the call of the common kestrel. In Sanskrit literature this bird has the beautiful name *ākāśa-yoginī*, the meditator in the sky. This is because of its ability to stay suspended in the sky for long periods.

The parrot makes the concluding remarks. The Great Cuckoo summarizes the philosophical lessons and asks the birds of Tibet to meet again the next year and not to lose the spirit of the Dharma. Furthermore, he expects them to hand on this knowledge to other small birds and the tiny ones who could not join the meeting.

The following year again the Great Bird went to Tibet. During this meeting in the woods of Yalung, the great land of birds, birds like the owl, the partridge and the hoopoe expressed their views elaborately. A few birds promised to discard their bad habits. Some interesting examples may be cited. The pigeon promised not to reside in the stupas and shrines because its droppings made the stupas shabby. The lark agreed to worship the Three Jewels with a melodious song. The lark is specifically described here as 'one of the smaller birds'. According to Monier-Williams's *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* the *kalavinka* is a sparrow or the In-

dian cuckoo. Most probably this term refers to the ashy crowned sparrow-lark or the small Indian skylark or any other species of lark that is famous for its musical notes. The hoopoe promised to make its winter home in caves. Usually the hoopoe nests in holes in trees and walls, suitable niches in the earthen bunds and mounds, or under thatched roofs in rural areas. Its nest is initially clean but soon becomes very smelly and filthy. In a way the hoopoe also promised cleanliness by shifting its nest. The cock promised not to disturb the dawn. This promise perhaps has its background in the Akalaravi Jataka (no. 119) where the cock was punished for waking people up at ungodly hours.



## Conclusion

This has been an attempt to understand the personified images of birds in the Tibetan text *Precious Garland*. I have tried to find out whether there are specific folklores and mythological notions or an impact of the Jatakas behind particular beliefs regarding birds. This was thus a humble effort to analyse Buddhist literature from the ethno-ornithological point of view. \*

## Acknowledgement

I am thankful to Dr Shrikant Bahulkar and Dr Satish Pande for their valuable suggestions.

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9. Benoytosh Bhattacharya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1924), 78-9, 137.
10. *The Jatakas*, numbers 159, 491 and 339.

Creatures from mind their character derive; mind-marshalled are they, mind-made.

—Buddha

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# Ramakrishna: His Name and the Science of Japa

SWAMI CHETANANANDA

*(Continued from the previous issue)*

God's name is the medicine to cure the suffering from the disease of worldliness. To eradicate human suffering, the Master used to sing:

O Mother, ever blissful as Thou art,  
Do not deprive Thy worthless child of bliss!

Once a devotee asked for advice from M concerning his lack of sincerity in spiritual life.

M: 'Pray to the Master for longing.'

Devotee: 'I don't feel any inclination to pray.'

M: 'Well, if you cannot do that, repeat the mantra that you received from your guru. Your mind may not be concentrated, but go on repeating the mantra ten to fifteen thousand times a day. You will develop love for God by repeating the name, then gradually you will feel detachment for worldly objects, and finally your kundalini will be awakened.'

Devotee: 'I don't feel any longing to repeat the mantra.'

M: 'Then your case is serious and there is little hope for survival. Developing a taste for God's name is the last treatment for a dying person. If you have love for God's name, you will transcend fear. It comes in time.'<sup>25</sup>

## The Results of Chanting God's Name

Everyone in this world is looking for peace, bliss, and liberation. These three things are not different; they are one and the same. The minds of ordinary people are full of restlessness, worry, and anxiety. Chanting God's name restrains sense impulses, cleanses the mind of impurities, strengthens the intellect, and energizes the body. Swami Shivananda said: 'The name of Ramakrishna is the mantra for this age. Those who take refuge in his name will attain peace. Chant his name with devo-

tion. Tremendous power is hidden in his name.'<sup>26</sup>

God has incarnated in every age, taking different names. In this age He has appeared as Ramakrishna. Swami Vasudevananda writes: 'There is wonderful glory in his name. This name offers assurance in bad times, joy in good times, medicine for disease, light in darkness. After death, this name leads a person to the realm of immortality. This name establishes peace during conflict and makes the mind one-pointed in meditation.'<sup>27</sup>

The primary result of chanting God's name is the vision of God or attainment of liberation; the secondary result is physical and mental peace. Ramakrishna said: 'If a man repeats the name of God, his body, mind, and everything become pure.'<sup>28</sup> 'The name of God has very great sanctity. It may not produce an immediate result, but one day it must bear fruit' (146).

Again the Master said: 'All the sins of the body fly away if one chants the name of God and sings His glories. The birds of sin dwell in the tree of the body. Singing the name of God is like clapping your hands. As, at a clap of the hands, the birds in the tree fly away, so do our sins disappear at the chanting of God's name and glories' (181-2).

It is said that King Dasharatha went out to hunt and accidentally killed a brahmin. To expiate this great sin, he went to his guru, the sage Vasishta, but he was not at home. The sage's son advised Dasharatha to repeat the name of Rama three times, and later informed his father. Vasishta was angry at his son and said: 'You will be born as a *chandala* [an untouchable]. If a man repeats Rama's name once, he

becomes free from all sins of the world. You underestimated the glory of that name by advising Dasharatha to repeat it thrice.'

Sometimes the Master humourously glorified God's name. On 1 January 1883, a devotee brought a basket of *jilipis* (a type of sweet) for the Master. Eating a bit, he said to the devotee with a smile: 'You see, I chant the name of the Divine Mother; so I get all these good things to eat.' All laughed. He continued: 'But She doesn't give such fruits as gourds or pumpkins. She bestows the fruit of Amrita, Immortality—knowledge, love, discrimination, renunciation, and so forth' (175).

In this present age Ramakrishna demonstrated the result of chanting God's name. He did not touch money, he saved nothing, he built no home, but he joyfully spent his life chanting the Mother's name. Regarding the glory of the Master's name, Holy Mother said: 'The Master told me, "Those who take my name, they will not suffer." "Those who think of me, they will never want for food." "For those who call on me, I shall be present at their last moment."'”<sup>29</sup> Holy Mother said: 'One will have to bear the result of one's action. But if you chant God's name, you will get the prick of a needle instead of a plough-deep cut. Japa and austerities eradicate a lot of bad karma' (115).

### 'Who Are You?'

It is extremely difficult to recognize the person called Ramakrishna. Vivekananda, Girish, and many great scholars were puzzled by him. One day Girish asked the Master, 'Sir, who are you?' Ramakrishna replied: 'Some say I am Ramprasad; some say I am Raja Ramakrishna; I just live here.'<sup>30</sup> Yogin-ma's grandmother read an article on Ramakrishna in Keshab Sen's magazine and came to Dakshineswar. Ramakrishna did not care for fancy clothing, and he did not wear an ochre cloth. He had no rosary nor any external marks on his body. The old grandmother asked the Master: 'Hello, could you tell me where the Paramahansa is?' The Master answered: 'Who knows?

Some call him "Paramahansa", some call him "young priest", and others "Gadadhar Chattopadhyay", or "crazy brahmin". Ask someone else about him.'<sup>31</sup>

Ramakrishna hid himself. He had no desire to make himself known to the general public. Sometimes he indirectly or directly revealed his real nature to devotees:

Master: 'Well, do you find me to be like anybody else?'

M: 'No, sir. You can't be compared to anybody else.'

Master: 'Have you heard of a tree called the "achina" [literally, unrecognizable]?'

M: 'No, sir.'

Master: 'There is a tree called by that name. But nobody knows what it is.'<sup>32</sup>

Master: 'Alas! To whom shall I say all this? Who will understand me? ... God becomes man, an avatar, and comes to earth with His devotees. And the devotees leave the world with Him.'

Rakhal: 'Therefore we pray that you may not go away and leave us behind.'

Master: 'A band of minstrels suddenly appears, dances, and sings, and it departs in the same sudden manner. They come and they return, but none recognizes them' (943).

Master (*to M*): 'The other day when Harish was with me, I saw Sachidananda come out of this sheath [his own body]. It said, "I incarnate Myself in every age"' (720).

'It is the Divine Mother Herself who dwells in this body and plays with the devotees' (831).

The disciples never hesitated to test the Master. Each time they did so, the Master would pass the test effortlessly. With a smile, he would tell them playfully: 'Still you doubt! Have firm faith and strong conviction. He who in the past was born as Rama and Krishna is now living in this very body (*pointing to himself*). But this time his advent is very secret, like a king who visits his own kingdom incognito! As soon as people recognize him and whisper, he immediately departs from that place. It is just like that.'<sup>33</sup>

The Master revealed his identity at other times as well: 'Wherever there is any trouble in

the Divine Mother's empire, I shall have to rush there to stop it, like a government officer' (649). 'One who is living his last birth will come here. A person who has sincerely called on God, even once, will definitely come here' (651).

'Look, before you begin meditating, think of this (*pointing to himself*) for a while. Do you know why I say this? Because you have faith in this place [meaning, in him]. If you think of this place, that will remind you of God' (437).

'Look, your Chosen Deity is in this place (*pointing to his body*). If you think of me, that will bring recollectedness of your Chosen Deity.'<sup>34</sup>

### 'Just Mention My Name'

Ramakrishna seldom used the words 'I' and 'mine'. In the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, we find that he used the words 'this', 'in this', 'here', and 'in this place' to indicate himself. 'I' and 'mine' are the warp and woof of maya. This net of maya could not catch Ramakrishna; he had full control over it. While explaining the word *bhavamukha*, Swami Saradananda tried to unveil the mystery of Ramakrishna's 'I'. Saradananda describes four stages of the ego:

1. When the Master was absorbed in nirvikalpa samadhi, his 'I' or ego was dissolved in Nirguna Brahman.

2. When the Master came down one step from that exalted state, his feeling 'I am a part of God' would gradually disappear and the Cosmic I or the Divine Mother's 'I' would become manifest through him, and he would act as a guru. At that time the Master would not appear to be humbler than the humblest: his demeanour, and his behaviour with others and other actions took a different form. Becoming like the mythical wish-fulfilling tree, he would ask a devotee, 'What do you want?' as if he were ready to use his superhuman power to fulfil the devotee's desire immediately.

3. After coming one step down from that state, the Master would say, 'I am a child of the Mother', 'I am a devotee', 'I am a servant'. Thus he would become humbler than the humblest

and teach people by becoming an instrument of the Divine Mother. He used to call this 'ripe I', the last stage of 'knowledge I'.

4. The lowest state is the 'unripe I', or 'ignorant I'. The Master gave examples of this ego: 'I am a brahmin, I am a son of such and such, I am a pandit, I am rich', and so on. This 'I' is the cause of bondage.

Swami Saradananda writes, 'After the Master attained nirvikalpa samadhi, his little, or unripe, "I" completely disappeared.'<sup>35</sup>

Ramakrishna said to Swami Turiyananda: 'Nothing can be achieved—neither knowledge, nor devotion, nor vision—without God's grace.' Then he sang a song in which Hanuman tells the sons of Rama:

O Kusa and Lava, why are you so proud?  
If I had not let myself be captured,  
Could you have captured me?<sup>36</sup>

One day Ramakrishna compassionately asked M: 'What do you think of me? How many annas of knowledge of God have I?' M replied: 'I don't understand what you mean by "annas". But of this I am sure: I have never before seen such knowledge, ecstatic love, faith in God, renunciation, and catholicity anywhere.' The Master laughed. Then the Master asked M to visit him at Balaram Basu's house in Calcutta. M bowed down and took his leave. When he returned, he found the Master pacing in the natmandir. Seeing him again, the Master asked the cause for his return. M said: 'Perhaps the house you asked me to go to belongs to a rich man. They may not let me in. I think I had better not go. I would rather meet you here.' Master: 'Oh, no! Why should you think that? Just mention my name. Say that you want to see me; then someone will take you to me.'<sup>37</sup>

'Just mention my name; then someone will take you to me' is a significant, hopeful statement. He is telling not only M but all lost and confused people of the world how to reach him. Doors will open in all directions for anyone who repeats his name—whether it is a wealthy man's mansion, or a poor man's cottage, or the labyrinth of the world. As a prince

has free access to any room in the palace and gatekeepers open the door for him with a salute, so Mahamaya opens the door of liberation for the disciples and devotees of an avatara. The avatara is the ruler of maya.

On another occasion the Master said to M: 'The devotees who come here may be divided into two groups. One group says, "O God, give me liberation." Another group, belonging to the inner circle, doesn't talk that way. They are satisfied if they can know two things: first, who I am; second, who they are and what their relationship to me is. You belong to this second group' (459). If people can establish a relationship with an avatara, their lives will be successful and they will be able to overcome worldly suffering and the fear of death. 'I am a devotee of Rama'—this faith and strong relationship empowered Mahavir Hanuman to win every battle and make the impossible possible.

On 1 January 1886 Ramakrishna became the Kalpataru (wish-fulfilling tree) and blessed his devotees, saying, 'Be illumined.' Navagopal Ghosh was not there at that time. When he came to Cossipore later, Ram Chandra Datta told him: 'Hello, sir, what are you doing? The Master has become a Kalpataru today. Please go to him right now. If you have anything to ask for, this is the right time.' Navagopal rushed to the Master and, bowing down to him, asked, 'Master, what will happen to me?'

After a little pause, the Master asked, 'Will you be able to practise a little japa and meditation?'

Navagopal replied: 'I am a family man with several children. Moreover, I am very busy with my various household duties and taking care of my family members. Where is the time to practise spiritual disciplines?'

The Master kept quiet for a while and then said, 'Can't you even repeat the Lord's name a few times regularly?'

'I don't have time, Master.'

'All right! Will you be able to repeat my name a few times?'

'Yes, that I can do.'

Then the Master said: 'That will do. You will not have to do anything else.'<sup>38</sup>

The compassionate Master showed his devotees the easiest way to attain God. In the twelfth chapter of the Gita, Krishna tells Arjuna about various methods of keeping the mind on God. He says: 'Fix your mind on Me. If you are unable to do that, then seek to reach Me by the yoga of constant practice. If you are unable to do that, then devote yourself to My service. If you are unable to do even this, then be self-controlled, surrender the fruit of all action, and take refuge in Me.' Similarly, Ramakrishna would advise some devotees: 'Repeat the mantra for three days in the shrine of Mother Kali. If you cannot do that for three days, please do so for a day.' He said to others: 'If you cannot practise japa and meditation, think of me.' 'You will not have to do any spiritual disciplines; you visit me often. As you have come today, please come another couple of days.' 'Come on either Tuesday or Saturday; that will be enough.' Sometimes the Master would say: 'After coming here, those who pray with a simple heart, "O Lord, how can I know You?" will definitely experience Him.'<sup>39</sup> Sometimes he would write something on a devotee's tongue, or say: 'It will be enough to think of or meditate on me.'<sup>40</sup>

### Ramakrishna's Name is Spreading

It is said that there is always a shadow under the lamp, but its light shines all around. M once went to Kamarpukur. When an old brahmin pandit of the village heard that M was a school headmaster, he said: 'Oh, you are a devotee of Gadai? Being a learned man, why did you become his devotee? He has not read any scriptures. He is illiterate.' M told him a few of the Master's teachings: 'A mere pundit, without discrimination and renunciation, has his attention fixed on "woman and gold". The vulture soars very high but its eyes are fixed on the charnel-pit.'<sup>41</sup> 'It is true that many things are recorded in the scriptures; but all these are useless without the direct realization of God. The al-

manac forecasts the rainfall of the year. But not a drop of water will you get by squeezing the almanac' (476). Later, that pandit understood his mistake.<sup>42</sup>

People around a great soul do not understand his value, whereas people from afar become attracted to the great one. Akshay Sen writes: 'One summer day some devotees were seated with the Master in the Panchavati. They were talking about God. In the course of conversation, someone referred to the people from Dakshineswar, Ariadaha, and Baranagore. Out of curiosity, he asked the Master: "People from distant places are coming to you and gaining peace. Why don't people from these nearby places come to you?" Without giving any direct reply, the Master pointed to a cow tied with a tether on the bank of the Ganges. She was obviously very thirsty but could not drink the sweet water nearby. In the meantime, some stray cows came from outside the temple garden and began to drink the Ganges water. Then the Master explained: "Look, this cow is tied with a rope; she is near the water but cannot drink it. On the other hand, those stray cows are free and they drink the water as soon as they are thirsty. People near the temple garden are bound, so they do not come here."<sup>43</sup>

Sound carries over a distance. The messages that were delivered by Ramakrishna in the temple garden of Dakshineswar are now crossing the oceans to spread all over the world. It is true: 'The name does not make a man famous; it is the man who makes his name famous.' Some time ago I read a book entitled *Thomas Merton: A Monk*. Thomas Merton was a well-known writer and a Trappist monk who died in 1968. This book is a compilation of the reminiscences of Thomas Merton by some Catholic monks and nuns. One day there was a discussion about divine love among the monks:

Thomas Merton: 'If you love another person, it's God's love being realized. One and the same love is reaching your friend through you, and you through your friend.'

David: 'But isn't there still an implicit dual-

ism in all this?'

Thomas Merton: 'Really there isn't, and yet there is. You have to see your will and God's will dualistically for a long time. You have to experience duality for a long time until you see it's not there. In this respect I am a Hindu. Ramakrishna has the solution.'<sup>44</sup>

A few years ago in Kansas City I went with some American devotees to a Japanese restaurant. Seeing me, a waitress asked me, 'Are you from India?' 'Yes', I replied. That young Japanese woman joyfully exclaimed: 'I know Ramakrishna.' Amazed, I asked, 'How do you know Ramakrishna?' She said that she had been a member of the Costa Mesa Yoga Centre in Southern California, where she had read about Ramakrishna. Still the voice of that young woman with her Japanese accent is ringing in my ears: 'I know Ramakrishna.' \*

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31. Swami Nirlepananda, *Ramakrishna-Saradamrita* (Calcutta: Karuna Prakashani, 1968), 16.
32. See *Gospel*, 283.
33. See *Divine Play*, 194.
34. *They Lived with God*, 142.
35. See *Divine Play*, 450.
36. *God Lived with Them*, 360.
37. *Gospel*, 92.
38. See *They Lived with God*, 245-6.
39. *Ramakrishna Mahima*, 64.
40. *Srima Darshan*, 2.56.
41. *Gospel*, 368.
42. *Srima Darshan*, 9.141-2.
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## Reviews



*For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA  
publishers need to send two copies of their latest publications.*

**Insights into Vedanta: Tattvabodha.** *Shankaracharya; trans. Swami Sunirmalananda.* Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai 600 004. E-mail: [srkmath@vsnl.com](mailto:srkmath@vsnl.com). xii + 355 pp. Rs 80.

*Insights into Vedanta* is an English translation and exposition of *Tattvabodha*, an introductory Sanskrit work on Advaita Vedanta in question-answer form. The authorship of the work is attributed to Sri Shankaracharya. *Tattvabodha* is as much a reference tool for advanced students of Vedanta as it is a useful guide for beginners.

Usual translations of Sanskrit works have word-for-word meanings, transliterations and translations, with notes on some important and abstruse points in the translation. The present translation has a refreshingly original approach, keeping the beginner's needs in mind. The book begins with an informative introduction to Advaita Vedanta and *Tattvabodha*. To facilitate systematic exposition and easy comprehension, the translator has divided the text into fifty-three chapters based on different topics. Every chapter begins with a detailed introduction to the topic it deals with. Each verse or text has its transliteration and translation, followed by a word-by-word exposition and detailed discussion. Important points are recapitulated at the end of the chapter, followed by a suggested-reading list and references.

The exposition draws profusely from the Upanishads, the Gita, the lives of holy men and, more important, the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. To elaborate on certain principles, the translator takes recourse to analysis of the views of the three schools of Vedanta (dualism, qualified non-dualism and non-dualism), the different schools within Advaita, and the other five systems of Indian philosophy. Illustration of certain concepts with charts facilitates easy comprehension.

The wide array of topics discussed in *Tattvabodha* underlines the importance of this work on

Advaita Vedanta: the teacher, the fourfold qualification of an aspirant, the three bodies (gross, subtle and causal), the three states of consciousness (waking, dream and deep sleep), the five sheaths covering the Atman, the twenty-four cosmic principles, the concepts of maya, jiva and Ishvara, the mind, the organs of action and the organs of knowledge, *panchikarana*, the meaning of '*Tattvamasi*', the different kinds of karma (*prarabdha*, *sanchita* and *agami*) and the state of a *jivanmukta* (free while living).

The translator and the publisher deserve our thanks for bringing out this neatly printed and moderately priced important book.

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**Ramana, Shankara and the Forty Verses.** *Ramana Maharshi and Shankara; trans. Arthur Osborne and S S Cohen.* Motilal Banarsidass, 41 U A Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, New Delhi 110 007. E-mail: [mlbd@vsnl.com](mailto:mlbd@vsnl.com). 2005. 160 pp. Rs 195.

Think of Ramana Maharshi and his teaching of self-enquiry—'Who am I?'—comes to mind. Ramana taught an austere, minimalist Advaita, centred around an insistent enquiry into the nature of the enquirer, leading to direct intuition of the Atman. The true Self lies beyond the sphere of reason and language, but reason and language can be used to indirectly indicate It.

Ramana has poured the essence of his teaching into *Ulladu Narpadu* (Forty Verses on What Is). Various English versions exist, notably a translation and philosophical commentary by the great Advaita scholar T M P Mahadevan. Again, Ganapati Muni has also translated the original Tamil into Sanskrit and English. Cohen's translation is simple, philosophically precise and easily accessible to English-reading people. He writes: '... all that the seekers (*sadhakas*) need and want is to understand the spirit of Bhagavan's utterances and apply it in their



spiritual practice (*sadhana*).’ The essence of *Ulladu Narpadu* is this: enquiry into the nature of the self exposes the spurious nature of our empirical self, and the real Self—the ground of all phenomena, both subjective and objective—stands revealed.

Ramana spoke little and cared less about writing. At the request of his disciples, he sometimes translated Shankara’s works into Tamil. The present volume includes these works as well, notably the ‘Dakshinamurti Stotra’ and verses from the *Vivekachudamani*, which have been translated into English by Arthur Osborne. The difficulties of retranslating into English Ramana’s Tamil renderings of Shankara’s Sanskrit compositions are naturally daunting. However, the translators have taken every care to preserve Maharshi’s spirit—Cohen compared six English versions of the ‘Forty Verses’ besides those of Tamil scholars.

We are attracted to Ramana Maharshi because his teachings and life reflect the Advaitic truth—that our true nature is infinite Existence and infinite Light—authentically and directly. This select collection of Maharshi’s works, both original and his translations of Shankara, will be a worthwhile addition to the libraries of aspirants and scholars alike.

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Belur, Howrah

### **The Universe, God and God-realization.**

*Swami Satprakashananda.* Ramakrishna Math, Chennai. 2004. 310 pp. Rs 75.

**T**his is yet another masterly work from the brilliant pen of Swami Satprakashananda, who spent the major part of his life preaching Vedanta in the United States as the spiritual minister of the Vedanta Society of St Louis, Missouri. His works, *The Goal and the Way*, *Meditation: Its Process, Practice and Culmination*, and *Methods of Knowledge*, are well known in both the East and the West. Some of his books have been prescribed as texts of oriental philosophy in Western universities. The volume under review is the first Indian impression of the original American edition. Indian readers would be thankful to Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, for making this precious book available at a very affordable price.

There is an innate urge in every one of us to attain perfection and this urge can only cease through God-realization. Realization of God is the birthright

of everyone. It is the supreme purpose of human life. The religions and philosophies of the world have come up with different methods and paths towards this one end. But among all of them, the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta has consistently appealed to thinking minds everywhere because of its universality, rationality and practicality. In addition to this supreme purpose of life, Vedanta has also another urgent and important message to the world, namely, the forging of world-unity through harmony of religions and oneness of mankind.

The learned author, in his own inimitable and simple style, brings out this practical bearing of the Advaita philosophy and outlines its way to God-realization. Beginning with the explanation of the basics of Vedanta, he takes us step by step through the origin of the universe and quest for the ultimate Reality to the realization of the all-perfect Supreme Being. The author points out that the ultimate Reality, Brahman, is both transcendent and immanent. It pervades the entire universe and is beyond it. The Advaitic way to its attainment involves the practice of ethics, and karma yoga, bhakti yoga and jnana yoga, in that order. This practice culminates in the discovery of the spiritual unity behind the apparent diversities.

Though karma yoga as a path has always had immense potentialities in the creation of a new order of world civilization, it was Swami Vivekananda who brought out its full significance in the modern context. He did this through the two cardinal principles of awakening faith in oneself and service of human beings considering them to be manifestations of the One God. Karma yoga is the stepping stone to travel on the path of spirituality. It paves the way for the practice of other yogas and is the common basis of all of them. Performed in the right spirit, karma yoga purifies the mind and leads an aspirant towards freedom, joy and equanimity of vision. It gradually prepares one to take up the path of bhakti yoga.

Through bhakti yoga, one cultivates a definite and deep relation with his Chosen Ideal. The attainment of unswerving devotion to the Chosen Ideal is the greatest treasure cherished by a devotee of God. To progress on the path of bhakti, the company of holy men is very essential. The grace of the Divine descends through holy men. By meditating on God through an image, the bhakta outgrows image worship and realizes that the very same Being that is present in the image pervades the entire universe. This is the stage of realization of Saguna Brahman.

But the Ultimate is still farther. One has to realize Nirguna Brahman to attain the Absolute, i.e. the establishment in the identity of the individual self with the Supreme Self. This is achieved through in-depth meditation on the *mahavakyas*, which form the central core of Vedanta. The author elucidates the above steps in simple and clear terms.

Some of the difficult Advaitic concepts like reconciling realism and idealism through the principle of maya, the evolution of the universe through gradual manifestation of Brahman starting with the lowest protoplasm and ending with the most perfect human being, and the idea of the emanation of the world out of the Word (termed Logos, or *sphota*), have been dealt with in great detail and with remarkable lucidity.

The book deals with an intricate subject matter in a way that can be easily understood and put into practice by laymen.

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**Happy for No Good Reason.** *Swami Shankarananda*. Motilal Banarsidass. 2004. 244 pp. Rs 225.

In our day-to-day life we are wont to derive happiness only from external and so-called 'favourable' situations. If a situation is not in our favour, we become miserable. We put *our* happiness in *others'* pockets (or in external situations), and suffer. We let ourselves be at the mercy of others, totally dependent—and in dependence is misery; in independence alone is happiness. That is the secret of true happiness. But can we be happy independent of external circumstances? There is a focus in us from where flows an unbroken stream of happiness unconditionally. That is known by a process of systematic self-enquiry, gradually maturing into meditation on and the experience of that supreme dimension within us.

*Happy for No Good Reason* by Swami Shankarananda is a good book exploring this process and its possibilities. It has two parts: Part One deals with 'Meditation on the Self'. The ideas here have been put forth through personal anecdotes, stories and instructions. Our fragmented personality needs integration. This process of integration is not only of the various faculties within, but also of the internal world with the universe outside. This holistic view accounts for our success in cheerfully overcoming the strains of life, which otherwise bog us down. Part

Two, 'Meditation in the World', precisely deals with this. It teaches us how to integrate into our daily life what we gain from meditation. The superior understanding coming from meditation needs to be synchronized with our workaday life. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that God exists not merely when we sit with our eyes closed but also when we have our eyes open.

The subject has been delineated step by step and clearly. Several techniques of meditation and subsidiary contemplations have been discussed. In the words of the author, 'this book is first and foremost a meditation and self-inquiry manual-cum-work-book'. It has also an appendix and glossary of Sanskrit terms. Accompanied by a CD on guided meditation, it no doubt makes for an interesting and illuminating reading.

However, claims such as 'this book would make you meditate within thirty minutes' have to be regarded with some reservation. Readers ought to know that success in meditation cannot be had in a capsule. Every person's progress in this path depends on the magnitude of his or her acquired tendencies, good or bad, resulting in fast or slow progress respectively. It also depends much upon the degree of determination which one brings to bear on the task. Finally, and not the least, a steady moral and value-based life forms the bedrock of success in such a venture. One ought to know where one stands and then proceed. Anyhow, it can never be too late to embark on such a noble journey and progress according to one's capacity. This book will certainly help one do that.

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**Build Your Personality.** *Swami Purushotamananda*. Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Fort, Belgaum 590 016. E-mail: [rkmissionashrama@rediffmail.com](mailto:rkmissionashrama@rediffmail.com). 2004. 86 pp. Rs 30.

This book offers a detailed exposition of what may be called the Indian concept of an ideal personality in all its aspects. It is a short but comprehensive study of a subject which has assumed so much importance in modern times. Most of the books being written these days on personality development from a spiritual point of view have a very serious drawback: they are often out of touch with the present-day realities. They harp on old values with-

out explaining how these can actually be practised today. Talking about Atman, spiritual strength and purity of action is all right in theory but, how, if at all, can they be practised in a profit-oriented, success-driven society which values results more than the means to obtain them?

In his introduction the author discusses the various aspects that constitute an integral personality under four categories: physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual. According to him, a comprehensive, powerful personality is strong in all four of these dimensions. The classification may look simplistic at a glance. But when we go deeper we find that the author's exposition of these four dimensions of human personality is quite convincing and exhaustive. To obtain the physical strength necessary for leading a successful life we must give attention to four aspects, namely food, exercise, cleanliness and freedom from worry, says the author. Similarly, to obtain intellectual strength it is necessary that we cultivate such virtues as alertness, deep study, deep thinking and prayer. A person who wants to develop moral strength must develop purity of thought, speech and action. But the central aspect of a fully developed personality, according to Swami Purushottamanandaji, is spiritual strength. The author gives a detailed exposition of related topics such as the necessity and importance of meditation, the nature of Atman and various meditation techniques.

An enlightened person with a universal outlook should go beyond the conventional definitions of personality. He should be a sound combination of idealism and pragmatism; this is the essence of an integrated personality—a synthesis of spiritual rationalism and rational spirituality. Extreme conservatism is, like extreme modernism, a negative virtue.

An ideal personality should be capable of change and readjustment according to changing trends. A dynamic person moves ahead of his times and immediate circumstances and is, therefore, a link between two stages of human development. Sometimes such individuals may represent two conflicting phases of human development. But an ideal, integrated personality goes beyond this. He has resolved his conflicts through a process of synthesis and integration. His personal traits have a spiritual content, an aspect often ignored by those who take a psychoanalytical or behavioural approach in analysing the human personality. Here the question arises: 'Is there such a thing as an Indian concept of personality?' The answer to this question is this readable

volume, explaining how we can develop a character which synthesizes the best of modern and the best of traditional values of life. After all, it is what a man does and not what he says that defines his personality.

The author deserves our gratitude for bringing out an excellent though short volume on a relevant subject, which is as much misunderstood as it is discussed.

Swami Tattwamayanaanda

Editor, *Prabuddha Keralam*  
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### **Tulasi: The Goddess Lakshmi of Hindus.**

*Kalluri Suryanarayana.* Sankhyayana Vidya Parishat, 2-12-34, Annapoorna Colony, Uppal, Hyderabad 500 039. 2003. 72 pp. Rs. 45.

Often we do need a shock treatment to get out of *tamas*. One day we find that white ants have silently eaten away a portion of a priceless book on our shelf. Then we scurry around cleaning the area and spraying the suggested insecticide to safeguard the future. Such a condition of wakefulness has been thrust upon us by the attempts to steal neem from India through a foreign patent. This has led us to check up our received environmental treasures. High on the list is *tulasi*. Fortunately *tulasi* has been close to our consciousness because of its presence in traditional lore. Kalluri Suryanarayana gives a gist of some of the references to *tulasi* in our Puranas and how it is dear to Vishnu.

Why was *tulasi* hailed as Goddess Lakshmi by the Hindus? Probably our elders thought this was the best way to keep us healthy, for health is wealth. *Tulasi* is Lakshmi because the shrub has a special status among the six hundred Ayurvedic herbs, says Suryanarayana. He also notes that the Hindu housewife's firm commitment to *tulasi* puja has retained a familiarity with it as a health herb in Indian homes.

The slender volume includes the *tulasi kavacha*, *stotra*, *mantra* and *puja-vidhi* given in Sanskrit with English translation. There is also an important note on how every part of the shrub (leaf, stem, inflorescence, seed and root) has high medicinal value and how it also acts as a repellent for bugs, mosquitoes, moles and snakes.

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# Reports

## Communal Harmony Award for Mission

The National Foundation for Communal Harmony, an autonomous organization with the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, conferred the National Communal Harmony Award for 2005 on the Ramakrishna Mission in recognition of its



outstanding contribution towards promotion of communal harmony and national integration. The award, which consisted of a citation and a sum of five lakh rupees, was handed over by the President of India, Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, to Swami Smarananandaji, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, in a function held at Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi, on 1 May 2006.

Part of the citation read as follows:

*Ramakrishna Mission and its monastic counterpart, Ramakrishna Math, with their more than 150 branch centres in different parts of India and the world, have been actively promoting inter-religious understanding and harmony of religions for more than a hundred years. Through their books and journals, and discourses given by*

*the monks, they popularize the universal doctrines of different religions. They often convene inter-religious conferences in which representatives of different religions explain the main principles of their respective religions. Indeed, in a world torn by conflicts, Ramakrishna Mission stands out as a unique example of communal harmony.*

## Relief and Rehabilitation

The Batticaloa sub-centre of **Ramakrishna Mission, Colombo**, has started special welfare activities for tsunami-affected people. One of them is a charitable dispensary at Shiva Puri, which was inaugurated on 28 April by Swami Atmaghananandaji, head of the Colombo centre. The dispensary is open every afternoon and provides free medical service to all patients. An average of 35 patients visit the dispensary daily. Between February and April the centre also handed over 8 more houses to tsunami victims. Work is in progress on 90 other houses taken up for construction.

**Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Society, Jamshedpur**, distributed 750 kg rice, 75 kg pulses, 80 saris, 60 dhotis, 50 shirts, 60 blouses and 53 children's garments among other things to 193 persons of Dandudih village in East Singhbhum district whose houses had been destroyed in a fire accident, in April.

The following centres of the Ramakrishna Mission distributed various items among the poor and needy people in their localities: Agartala (121 dhotis, 224 saris), Coimbatore (200 blankets), Jayrambati (1,686 saris, 1,001 dhotis, 1,071 blankets), and Varanasi (425 blankets).

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## Correction

In Swami Tathagatanandaji's article 'Dhan Gopal Mukerji and *The Face of Silence*' (January 2006) it was mentioned that 'Swamiji called himself a second Shankara' (119). The sentence should read: 'Miss MacLeod ignited his interest in Swamiji when she told him that Swamiji and Shankara were one and the same.'